

The United States in the Middle East: The Year in Review

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Introduction

At the dawn of President Obama's second term, the United States faces a new Middle East, with the old order shattered and no new clear configuration yet emerging. The paradoxes, conflicting forces, and alliances that have emerged in the context of the Arab uprisings and that engage the US are best described in the following passage:

Alliances are topsy-turvy, defy logic, are unfamiliar and shifting. Theocratic regimes back secularists; tyrannies promote democracy; the US forms partnerships with Islamists; Islamists support Western military intervention. Arab nationalists side with regimes they have long combated; liberals side with Islamists with whom they then come to blows. Saudi Arabia backs secularists against the Muslim Brothers and Salafis against secularists. The US is allied with Iraq, which is allied with Iran, which supports the Syrian regime, which the US hopes to help topple. The US is also allied with Qatar, which subsidizes Hamas, and with Saudi Arabia, which funds the Salafis who inspire jihadists who kill Americans wherever they can.¹

In his second term, the United States President will have to chart a compromise between two major courses of action in the Middle East. In his first term, he already steered the US away from Afghanistan and Iraq. In the

efforts to oust the previous Libyan regime, he responded to the initiative of the French President at the time and led the military effort “from behind.” As to Syria, the Russian-Chinese rejection of the United Nations Security Council for a mandate to use military force is a convenient fig leaf for the US, with Washington exploiting it to justify its military inaction against the Assad regime. As for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in the second half of his first term, the US President relieved himself of the attempt to reach a political solution.

There will be much temptation in the US administration to maintain this course, but it is highly likely that the US will be forced to become more deeply engaged and involved than some in Washington, and in the Middle East, would like.

The Iranian Nuclear Effort

The Iranian issue dominated US-Israeli discourse from 2009 to 2012, with the two sides trying and failing to reach a common strategy to deal with the Iranian effort to obtain military nuclear capability. While the area of US-Israeli agreement on this file is wide, there are several key issues on which disagreement prevailed in the past and may emerge in the near future.

In the presidential debate dedicated to foreign policy matters, President Obama asserted emphatically, “As long as I am President of the United States, Iran will not get a nuclear weapon.”² While reassuring, this statement does not provide clear answers to serious questions, such as what the US or Israel will do if Iran continues to enrich uranium at the current 20 percent level without going for a weapon, but approaching a breakout point. These and other questions sparked an open, shrill argument between the two candidates.

In the spring of 2012, Israel began sending signals that it could not afford to wait any longer and would strike unilaterally in order to set Iran’s program back.³ In response, the Obama administration sent its top military and diplomatic brass to Jerusalem to convince Israel that the United States could be counted on to end Iran’s program – even if that required the use of military force should all else fail. In order to make these promises more credible and reassure its allies, the US took a range of steps short of war to enhance its strike capabilities. Over June and July 2012, it moved a second

aircraft carrier into the Gulf region, added a ship (*USS Ponce*) in the Persian Gulf that acts as a platform for helicopters and Special Operations Forces, and augmented minesweeping capabilities including underwater drones that can find and destroy mines. It also began construction of a missile defense radar station in Qatar.⁴ Finally, in late September 2012, the United States and more than 25 other nations held the largest-ever minesweeping exercise along with other naval exercises in the Gulf to reinforce their ability to respond to any Iranian military action in the area.

Whether the President of the United States is willing to use military power against Iran should all other means fail is another point of potential friction and distrust between the US and Israel. Israel supports the use of sanctions and has not objected to diplomacy to reach a solution, and officials have recognized that the sanctions adopted by the international community, mostly the US and the European Union (EU), have left their mark on Iran. They have not publicly reacted to the reports that the US and Iran will have one-on-one negotiations after the US presidential elections.⁵ It is a fair assumption, though, that Israel will press for a limited and relatively short time frame for any attempt of this sort; and will request that the US prevent Iran from exercising its normal pattern of delay tactics, from removing existing sanctions (or adding new ones), and certainly from removing the military option from the table.

The very agenda of potential US-Iran talks and the terms of a potential agreement could also contain bones of contention. These matters should be discussed and agreed upon between the US and Israel in advance. Iran achieving nuclear weapons capability has long been seen as a major threat to American interests. With a nuclear arsenal, Iran could increase its support of terrorism, expand its regional influence at the expense of US allies, and increase its aid to organizations opposed to Israel – all with greater impunity. A nuclear Iran would also call into question the future of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and could well lead to a deluge of new proliferators, especially in the Middle East. It is unlikely that the US will agree to conditions that relate directly to Israel, but the US agreement to support the 2010 NPT Review Conference's Final Document, heavily biased against Israel and calling for a conference to discuss a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone without regard to Israel's

preconditions for such activities, did ignite much concern in Jerusalem.⁶ Particular issues that should be dealt with in advance of US-Iran talks include the uranium enrichment in Iran itself as well as the whole system of verification, supervision, violations, and prior understandings between Israel and the US in the event that the arrangements agreed on with Iran fail.

In spite of the already close cooperation between Israel and the US, there is a need for further work toward reaching an understanding concerning both the political and the military options. The two governments should avoid sliding again into the public, almost acrimonious discussion of the summer of 2012 and maintain a united front. This in turn will greatly help the efforts to prevent Iran from pursuing its goals.

The “Arab Spring”

Since the end of World War II, American foreign policy has been torn between promoting its democratic ideals and promoting its security and economic interests. The so-called “Arab Spring” made this dilemma particularly acute, as the free elections that followed the overthrow of regimes in America’s traditional allies in the Arab world resulted in Islamist-led governments. Despite these parties’ past records of harsh anti-Americanism and criticism of America’s role in the region, Washington felt it could not openly take issue with the results of these democratic elections. Against the backdrop of the Islamist victories, Washington’s relations with countries throughout the region are in a state of flux. This is perhaps most evident in Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi won the presidency in June 2012. In Tunisia as well, Ennahda, a party that had been banned in the past, won a plurality of seats in elections last year, while Islamists gained support in Yemen. In Libya, the sole country where Islamists were defeated by moderates, the attack on the Benghazi consulate and assassination of the American ambassador gave the US cause for concern.

Of particular significance in this context are the triangular Cairo-Washington-Jerusalem relations. The rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest and most influential Islamist party in the region, posed the biggest challenge for American policy during 2012. As they have

elsewhere, US officials have cautiously engaged in diplomatic relations with the new Egyptian government, seeking to maintain Egypt's general pro-American orientation and commitment to peace with Israel. Before Morsi's purge of the military's leading generals, the Obama administration also sought to maintain close ties to the military, in the belief that the military would continue to hold sway over foreign policy.

Bilateral relations hit their first major crisis in early 2012, even before Morsi's election, when Egyptian security officials arrested 43 US citizens employed by several leading non-governmental organizations that worked to promote democracy in Egypt. Several months later, in September, when Egyptian protestors breached the embassy perimeter walls and met only with a weak Egyptian response while the Muslim Brotherhood called for more protests, President Obama reacted. He warned Morsi that relations would be jeopardized if Egyptian authorities failed to protect American diplomats and act more forcefully against anti-American attacks. In an interview with *Telemundo* the following day, Obama said of the evolving US-Egypt relationship:

I don't think that we would consider them [Egypt] an ally, but we don't consider them an enemy... I think it's still a work in progress, but certainly in this situation, what we're going to expect is that they are responsive to our insistence that our embassy is protected, our personnel is protected.⁷

But the major political issue between Egypt and the US will be the preservation of the 1979 Treaty of Peace between Egypt and Israel, reached and signed under US auspices. The Muslim Brotherhood has not officially threatened to abrogate the agreement with Israel, nor has it officially demanded to revise it. But the winds blowing from Cairo ever since the Muslim Brotherhood took power further lowered the temperature of the already cold peace that the government inherited from the Mubarak regime. Relations between Egypt and Gaza under the Hamas government, however, have warmed. Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense in Gaza demonstrated the fragile state of its relations with Egypt. The US and Egypt found themselves reacting in two distinctly different ways to the Israeli operation. While Egypt summoned its ambassador from Tel Aviv

“for consultations” and condemned Israel’s operation in harsh terms, under pressure from the Egyptian street President Morsi may feel the need for more visible and extreme reactions against Israel. This pressure would become especially acute with an Israeli land invasion of Gaza.

Conventional wisdom points to the dire state of Egypt’s economic situation since the uprising erupted in January 2011 and its need for US assistance as factors motivating Egypt to refrain from abrogating the 1979 Treaty of Peace entirely. Egypt’s official reserve assets, which amounted to \$145 billion at the close of 2010, dwindled to \$15.2 billion in September 2011.⁸ The tourism sector, one of Egypt’s most important sources of income, suffered a serious decline in the wake of the uprising, not least due to fears of terror, and uncertainty whether the Brotherhood would allow alcohol and freedom of dress on Egypt’s beaches. Meanwhile, exports fell by 20 percent in 2011 compared to 2010. With unemployment rising and exports falling, Egypt cannot afford to lose international – and especially US – assistance.⁹ The US Congress may also be less lenient than President Obama toward Egypt on issues relating to Israel, terror, or further attacks on US interests in Egypt. It may even react negatively to a call by Egypt to review the Treaty of Peace with Israel.

A rupture in US-Egyptian relations does not serve Israel’s interests, and may cause further instability in the region. Both Israel and the US share the hope that Egypt will regain full control of the Sinai Peninsula and prevent the area from being used by several terrorist organizations as a base for launching terror operations as well as a corridor for weapons being smuggled into Gaza. Given the Muslim Brotherhood’s influence over sister movements in other Arab countries, it is important for both the US and Israel to maintain open channels of communication with the new regime in Egypt. This will require a formidable effort and willingness on the part of the three governments involved. They may be called on for restraint when dealing with the Palestinian issue, including the possibility of further violent confrontations between Israel and Gaza, as well as the Palestinian (i.e., West Bank) moves in international organizations. Above all, the triangular relationship will be extremely strained in the wake of a military operation against Iran’s nuclear installations, if that occurs.

Nothing better exemplifies the shift in the US attitude to the “Arab Spring” and the recognition in Washington of the limitations on its power to influence events, as its involvement in the Syrian and Libyan uprisings, respectively. There are significant differences between the two cases. There was no international objection to using force in Libya, nor any foreseen ramification elsewhere to the use of force. The Libyan opposition seemed more united than the Syrian opposition, and the tribal differences do not amount to the ethnic, religious and political divisiveness of Syria.

Ostensibly, the main obstacle to military intervention in Syria has been the Russian and Chinese position at the UN. At times, however, American officials have also expressed concern about Syria's air defenses and its ballistic missile capability. In testimony before the Senate Armed Services committee on March 7, 2012, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin E. Dempsey explained the difficulties of military action:

The ability to do a single raid-like strike would be accessible to us. The ability to do a longer-term sustained campaign would be challenging and would have to be made in the context of other commitments around the globe. I'll just say this about their air defenses: They have approximately five times more sophisticated air defense systems than existed in Libya, covering one-fifth of the terrain. All of their air defenses are arrayed on their western border, which is their population center.¹⁰

Israel can only hope that such arguments will not be used against attacking Iran's nuclear facilities, should the need arise.

The shipment of munitions to unwanted terror groups is another reason for the US reluctance to aid the anti-Assad regime opposition. Following the experiences of post-Soviet Afghanistan and post-Qaddafi Libya, the US is concerned about the supply of advanced weapons that at some point can be used against allies such as Israel, or even US citizens. A classified US government report said arms shipments to Syrian rebels, organized and sent by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are reaching Muslim extremists – including those linked to al-Qaeda – rather than the secular opposition groups for whom they are intended.¹¹ The findings from the report call

into question whether the White House strategy of indirect intervention is achieving its stated and intended purpose. The President reiterated in the third presidential debate that the United States will do “everything we can do to make sure that we are helping the opposition” in Syria, while also ensuring that “we’re not putting arms in the hands of folks who eventually could turn them against us or our allies in the region.”¹²

Pursuing a tougher US line of action against the Assad regime will not necessarily increase the support of the Arab street for the US. Even those Arab governments that openly call for the end of the regime in Damascus may criticize the United States for its intervention, if that occurs. In the absence of clearer and better options, the US will likely cling to its current pattern of action in the Syrian file, though it can further isolate the regime diplomatically by recognizing the opposition as Syria’s official representation.

Israel’s low profile approach to the situation in Syria suits the US interests. At the same time, the Israeli government and US administration must look at the possible consequences of regime change in Damascus. Beyond internal chaos, which may last for several years, other regional players may become involved as well as several terror organizations. The control of conventional types of armaments held by the regular Syrian army as well as stocks of nonconventional weapons is a serious cause for concern. Both the US and Israel should continue to discuss solutions for these thorny questions.

A sensitive question relates to Jordan’s ability to withstand the internal pressures and the ramifications of the failure of the Hashemite monarchy to handle them. Jordan has been a solid member of the informal pro-US camp in the Middle East (with the exception of its support of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990). The weakening of the current regime could have a dramatic impact on the political configuration of the Middle East. The fact that the leading political opposition in Jordan is led by the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood is cause for deep concern, both for the US and Israel. The Muslim Brotherhood belt, which includes Egypt, Gaza, and Jordan, could cause serious problems for Israel. Given the political instability in Iraq and Syria, the addition of Jordan to that zone of instability could be detrimental to the future of the region.

The US has rushed to help the Jordanian government financially. It should not only continue to do so, but also put pressure on the Arab oil producing states to stand by their commitments.

The Peace Process

Ever since Israel captured the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, the future of these territories has been a source of disagreement and contention between the US and Israel. The first Obama administration was no exception. Although to some these years constituted the worst period in the history of the bilateral relationship, this impression is not necessarily borne out by the history of the bilateral relations.

The political landscape of the Middle East has undergone dramatic changes since President Obama entered the White House. What seemed to be feasible in 2009 is no longer valid or achievable today. Previous attempts to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and certainly those in which the United States has been involved, were premised on the notion that the final outcome must comprise a comprehensive solution to all core issues, i.e. Jerusalem, borders, and refugees. This was the premise that guided efforts during the first Obama administration. No consideration was given to any methodological alternative. Following two years of strained personal relations between the United States and Israel political leaderships over the issue of a settlement freeze, the entire process was abandoned by all three principal actors – the US, Israel, and the Palestinians. This was prompted not only by the impasse between the involved parties, but even more critically by the new regional developments. In light of mounting concerns over the rise to power of modern fundamentalist regimes in several Arab countries, it was unlikely that the Prime Minister of Israel would adopt a decision concerning Israel's final borders with both Jordan and the West Bank, or admission of refugees into Israel, two decisions that will be hard to make even under the most stable and clear circumstances in the region.

Under these circumstances, the second term Obama administration can decide to continue to abandon the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, hoping to resume the process if and when: the dust sweeping through the region settles; the question of the leadership in the Palestinian camp is settled amicably, closing the rift between Gaza and the West Bank;

and a new, stable government is formed in Israel after the January 22, 2013 elections that is willing and able to take decisions concerning long term relations with the Palestinians.

It is unlikely that the political dust in the region will settle in the next two years, and therefore the Israeli reluctance to make long term decisions will presumably continue. And yet, if the option of the two-state solution is to be maintained, a status quo is an unacceptable alternative, simply because the status quo is an illusion. Ongoing processes, such as the increased population in the settlements, especially in areas that are unlikely to remain under Israel's sovereignty in the context of an agreement, or the growing extremism among the Palestinians, will make the two-state solution an obsolete alternative.

The new Israeli government that emerges from the January 2013 elections would do well to develop an alternative approach and present an initiative to the US President, gain his support, and encourage him to pursue it. The main guiding principle of such an initiative on the Israeli side is the willingness to proceed toward the two-state solution in a gradual and incremental manner. This will include Israel's partial withdrawal from parts of Area C, and subsequent transfer of more power to the Palestinians in Area C, as well as Area B. In addition, Israel must be willing to halt settlement activities in certain areas, mostly east of the security fence. And finally, Israel must be willing to revise the economic and water agreements. For their part, the Palestinians could take steps, for example, toward a conditional recognition of Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people. Both sides will commit themselves to the final outcome of such a process, i.e., two states. Such an action plan, corresponding to the 2003 Roadmap, would be endorsed by the Quartet and the Security Council. If accepted, it could additionally contain an Israeli-US agreement not to block UN membership for the State of Palestine at a date agreed on by both Israel and the Palestinian government.

It is imperative that Israel submit this or a similar blueprint to the US President so as to preempt future haggling and misunderstandings resulting in new bilateral tensions. The most pressing matter in 2013 will almost certainly be the Iranian nuclear effort. For a successful effort on this matter, it is critical that the US and Israel reach the highest degree of coordination.

They cannot afford the sort of friction witnessed in 2012. An agenda for progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front will greatly facilitate this effort.

Conclusion

The process of change that engulfed the Middle East from late 2010 is probably in its early stages. Meanwhile, the international community, with its different actors, is still groping for answers how best to deal with the political and economic ramifications. Each Arab state poses a different set of challenges for the US and for Israel, respectively. The Arab uprising caught the US in the early stages of its gradual withdrawal from the Middle East and in the midst of recovery from the 2008-10 economic crisis. The major dilemma for the US has been the need to choose between upholding the values of democracy, the rule of law, the elimination of corruption, nepotism, and other problems that beset the Arab societies, and economic prospects; and the support for traditional allies, which in most cases were the pillars of the system that came under attack by the Arab masses.

In the most significant case, Egypt, the US very quickly chose to abandon President Mubarak, a long time ally and collaborator. However, the substitute regime in Egypt has joined the US string of disappointments and dilemmas in the Middle East. In Iraq, the forceful removal of Saddam Hussein by the US brought about a regime with a lukewarm attitude toward the US and a friendly stance toward Iran. In Libya, the US intervention helped to remove Qaddafi's regime, but it has yet to be seen how stable the new regime will be and to what extent it can hold the country together. In Syria, the US, though involved in the diplomatic efforts and logistical assistance to the Syrian opposition, is reluctant to become more deeply involved, especially militarily. The decision is predicated on lessons learned from the cases cited above, but also on the complexity of Syria's political, ethnic, and religious composition. This kaleidoscopic state was held together for decades by a brutal central minority-dominated regime that amassed all the tools of state control in its hands. The removal of this minority from absolute power almost guarantees several years of chaos before stability is restored. The US and Israel may prefer to concentrate more on containment of the Syrian crisis within its political borders rather than on trying to shape its future political structure and orientation.

A joint US and Israeli political agenda, especially if it contains a plan to advance the Israeli-Palestinian political process, will also help stabilize Israel's relations with Egypt and Jordan. This should be a key consideration in Israel's strategy in its attempt to weaken the fundamentalist ring emerging from the Arab uprising. The process that led to the ceasefire in Gaza in November 2012, following the escalation of rocket fire from Gaza and Israel's military operation to stop it, could be interpreted as an indication that a traditionally negative attitude toward Israel notwithstanding, the Muslim Brotherhood, once in power, can prioritize Egypt's needs and strategic interests. Israel and the US will have to find a way to live and perhaps expand this modus operandi, though expectations should not be inflated. Beyond leveraging the possibility for progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track, the Sinai Peninsula can serve as another platform for preventing deterioration in relations between Egypt and Israel. Egyptian willingness to take action against arms smuggling into Sinai, and thence to Gaza, translated into concrete performance, should in turn be matched by Israeli readiness to consider reasonable Egyptian proposals to modify certain articles in the military annex to the 1979 Treaty of Peace. The US, as a witness to the treaty, and being the leading actor in the multinational force deployed in the Sinai, could play an important role in mediating between Israel and Egypt if the latter requests changes to the annex.

The theme of the US shifting its major external affairs focus from Europe to the Middle East and to the Pacific and East Asia has received much attention in the public discourse in the US. It may be hasty, however, to conclude that the US is about to abandon the Middle East. In spite of repeated disappointments, a lack of prospects for success, and a rapidly declining dependence on the region's oil, the US has allies and commitments from which it cannot estrange itself. And yet Israel, to the extent that it deems a true US presence in the region strategically important, must consider the means of maintaining the US deployment and active engagement in the Middle East.

Notes

I wish to thank Rachel Beerman and Cameron Brown for their diligent work and assistance in preparing this chapter.

- 1 Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, "This Is Not a Revolution," *New York Review of Books*, November 8, 2012.
- 2 Third presidential debate, Boca Raton, Florida, October 22, 2012.
- 3 Defense Minister Ehud Barak and other Israeli officials warned that once the Fordow plant became operational, Iran would enter a "zone of immunity" where it could produce nuclear fuel without fear of an Israeli strike. See David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "Iran Said to Nearly Finish Nuclear Enrichment Plant," *New York Times*, October 25, 2012; Jonathan Lis and Natasha Mozgobia, *Haaretz*, March 3, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.1659743>; Attila Somfalvi, *Ynet*, May 31, 2012, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4236395,00.html>.
- 4 Adam Entous and Julian E. Barnes, "Pentagon Bulks Up Defenses in the Gulf," *Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 2012; David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt, "To Calm Israel, U.S. Offers Ways to Restrain Iran," *New York Times*, September 2, 2012; Barak Ravid, *Haaretz*, September 2, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.1814612>.
- 5 Helene Cooper and Mark Landler, "U.S. Officials Say Iran Has Agreed to Nuclear Talks," *New York Times*, October 20, 2012. US officials denied such an agreement but expressed willingness to hold the talks.
- 6 See www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2010/. The US later explained its participation in the consensus by which the Final Document had been approved, trying to allay Israel's concerns.
- 7 President Obama's interview with José Díaz-Balart, *Telemundo*, September 12, 2012.
- 8 IMF, "Egypt - International Reserves and Foreign Currency Liquidity," November 8, 2012.
- 9 US annual direct assistance amounts to \$1.3 billion in military assistance and some \$250 million in different economic projects. The US is currently considering a \$1 billion debt forgiveness and more than \$400 million in loan guarantees to US businesses operating in Egypt. The US is supporting the IMF loan of \$4.8 billion to Egypt.
- 10 US Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Situation in Syria, Statement of General Martin E. Dempsey, Joint Chiefs of Staff, March 7, 2012.
- 11 David E. Sanger, "Jihadists Receiving Most Arms Sent to Syrian Rebels," *New York Times*, October 14, 2012.
- 12 Third presidential debate, Boca Raton, Florida, October 22, 2012.