
Obama's Second Term Middle East Policy: Will Words Become Actions?

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With escalating bloodshed in Syria, a recalcitrant Iran bent on becoming a nuclear power, long-time ally Egypt under Muslim Brotherhood rule, Libya terrorized by armed Salafis, and a recent military escalation between Israel and Hamas, it is easy to see why President Barack Obama might hope for a graceful pivot to Asia. The Middle East's problems are complex and even well-intentioned efforts to ameliorate them do not always pay off. Unrewarding as it might be, however, the United States must have policies towards the Middle East because it has an interest in the free flow of oil to the global economy, the prevention of terrorism emanating from the area, the security of Israel, and the outcome of political transitions in key states such as Egypt.

There were two fundamental problems with President Obama's Middle East policies in his first term. First, Obama fell into the same trap as previous U.S. presidents, which was to formulate policies primarily based on a reaction to his predecessor rather than on a straight diagnosis of U.S. interests and regional needs. George W. Bush broke a great deal of crockery in the region after the September 2001 terrorist attacks, so Obama was determined to leave a light footprint—so light that in countries such as Iraq and Libya, he might have pulled out forces before ensuring that U.S. interests were met. Bush expressed an interest in the spread of democracy

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and freedom in the region, so Obama jettisoned those policy aims and returned to traditional state-to-state relations with Arab authoritarians, just two years before anti-authoritarian uprisings broke out throughout the region. Bush made only a late and unsuccessful effort at brokering Israeli-Palestinian peace, so Obama undertook a high profile negotiating venture from day one. This ended in an unmitigated diplomatic disaster when Prime Minister Netanyahu refused to freeze settlement construction and Arab states refused to offer olive branches without such a freeze.

The second and perhaps even more serious problem with Obama's first term policies was that while the President often took courageous positions on difficult issues, his administration rarely developed effective strategies to implement them. Obama said with admirable clarity that Iran must not have nuclear weapons, Egyptians deserve freedom from authoritarian rule, Syrian President al-Assad must leave power after carrying out unimaginable brutality against his people, and Israel should stop building settlements in the West Bank in order to leave room for a Palestinian state. But with the possible exception of sanctions on Iran (for which there was heavy pressure from the U.S. Congress), in none of those cases did the Obama administration develop and implement a serious plan for pursuing those positions. It was almost as though Obama and those around him believed that his presidency was so transformational that he needed merely to articulate the correct positions and others would surely fall in line behind him.

It should now be clear to President Obama that his strategy of leaving a light footprint in the Middle East has failed and needs rethinking. That does not mean that he should return to the unilateralism and military-

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heavy policies of the Bush years, but it does mean that U.S. leadership is badly needed on several issues, and that Americans and others will pay a heavy price if he continues to stay aloof.

The most pressing current issue is the ongoing rebellion in Syria, which cries out for U.S. leadership to unite a fractious international effort that has failed to stop horrific bloodletting.

Having encouraged the creation of new political opposition leadership, the United States then joined other countries in recognizing the Syrian National Coalition in November 2012 as the legitimate representative of Syrians. The task now is to support the creation of an alternative government by this Coalition, preferably based in a liberated area of Syria itself.

The Syrian conflict now seems nearly certain to be decided by arms rather than diplomacy. Therefore, even if the Coalition forms a government, it will only become a central focus for decision-making if it becomes the most effective channel for support to the armed rebel groups. Obama's administration should assess whether the Syrian rebels can win—that is, whether they can provoke the collapse of the Assad regime—without international support. If not, what sort of support—such as the provision of anti-aircraft weapons or the imposition of a no-fly zone—is required to end this conflict sooner rather than later? In his first term, Obama used uncertainty about the ultimate outcome of the conflict as a justification for inaction. But with more than 40,000 Syrians dead, at least ten times as many made refugees, the infiltration of al-Qaeda militants, and dangerous spillover into neighboring states, it is now clear that all the negative consequences that Obama feared from intervening have come to pass anyway.

President Obama faces a similar dilemma with Iran in the sense that he has committed himself to an undertaking—preventing the country from attaining nuclear weapons—that might prove impossible to achieve without military action, which he undoubtedly wants to avoid. In fact, it is difficult to imagine this president attacking Iran unless it was in direct response to military provocation. Economic sanctions have taken a heavy toll on Iran, but it is not yet clear whether they will change the calculus of the Iranian Supreme Leader to the extent required for an agreement to cease the enrichment of uranium. A political change within Iran could alter the environment, although perhaps not erase the country's desire to be a nuclear power. Obama missed his chance to encourage such a political change in 2009 and it is not clear when that chance will come again.

Three scenarios suggest themselves for how U.S. dealings with Iran may go in the next year or two. The scenario the Obama administration is likely to pursue, but which is unlikely to succeed, is that Iran will finally agree to cease uranium enrichment via some sort of grand bargain with the United States. The second, also unlikely to succeed although highly desirable, is that the United States will find new technical means to deny Iran the ability to make a weapon. The third and most likely to happen is that Iran will attain at least a breakout nuclear capability during Obama's second term, forcing the President to move to a containment strategy.

The three North African countries of the Arab awakening—Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia—along with Yemen pose another challenge that Obama has yet to address effectively. These countries have embarked on journeys out of authoritarianism that will be long and troubled and have uncertain outcomes. Their potential for success—building democratic institutions,

free societies, and finally realizing their economic potential—is tremendous. And their potential for failure—a return to authoritarian rule of the Islamist or military variety or becoming platforms for violence projected throughout the region and the world—is frightening.

For the most part, President Obama has said the right things about these countries in his first term, but the actual help he extended was woefully inadequate. When the United States truly is committed to helping a country to succeed, it knows how to, not by providing all the assistance itself but by galvanizing help from other countries and international institutions. It will be challenging to construct economic and trade assistance that is vigorous and timely, yet still linked to conditions of true democra-

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tization and sound economic policies. But it is certainly possible to do so.

Finally, the festering Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the Middle East problem on which President Obama has tried hardest and failed most dramatically so far. The naïve and poorly planned initiative of his first term led to a humiliating diplomatic defeat, and it is understandable that he will not be eager to enter this arena again. But the issue is highly unstable, as the recent Israeli-Hamas conflict shows,

and is likely to need U.S. attention. What President Obama should do is to remain alert for opportunities that open the way for new approaches.

Obama has already missed one such opportunity: the Palestinian initiative, ultimately successful, to acquire non-member state status in the United Nations General Assembly. The U.S. administration stuck doggedly to its typical position of opposing any enhancement of Palestinian status in international organizations as a unilateral move. But was it not a unilateral move of a peaceful, diplomatic nature aimed at what the United States itself says is the goal of negotiations? The United States could have supported it, and even urged Israel to do likewise, as a vote of confidence in the two-state solution and in a peaceful Palestinian leadership that is in danger of being displaced. True, making Palestine a non-member state will allow the Palestinians to pursue their grievances against Israel more effectively in international institutions, but better that way than through violence. ■