

President Obama and the Middle East: a Mixed Legacy

Ellen Laipson

Distinguished Fellow

Stimson Center, Washington DC

As the Obama Administration draws to a close, a fierce debate over the President's legacy in the Middle East has begun. Some see a retrenchment from the region, due to the President's early commitment to end all combat operations and draw down military forces from Iraq and Afghanistan. They perceive a failure of American leadership to address more effectively the civil wars and state breakdowns across the region. Others see a more understandable rebalancing of American interests in the region and a long-term shift to encourage and enable more regional management of regional crises. In 2015, the achievement of an agreement with Iran that curtails its nuclear activities, progress in rolling back the territorial control of the Islamic State in parts of Iraq and Syria, and American-Russian cooperation to reinvigorate a peace process for Syria were noteworthy achievements, amidst a generally gloomy picture.

History of Obama's Approach to the Region

If one takes the President's Cairo speech¹ in June 2009 as the first measure of his approach to the region, it is clear that President Obama saw a troubled and challenging agenda ahead. The tumultuous legacy of President George W. Bush's policies in Iraq, the long-standing paradigm of privileging security cooperation over political reform, and the mounting socioeconomic distress in the region called for new ap-

proaches. The President outlined a new agenda, a full 18 months before the Arab Spring began, to build a different relationship. His agenda called on Arab leaders and societies to address violent extremism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, nuclear non-proliferation, democracy, religious freedom, women's rights and economic development. He said the United States would be a willing partner in pursuit of a better future for the region and its people.

One can imagine the President's disappointment at the fact that, despite the opportunities presented by the Arab Spring in 2011, the region has slipped backwards. There is new authoritarianism in Egypt, civil wars in Syria and Yemen, state failure in Libya and weak governance in Iraq, to name the most important. At the same time, Tunisia's fragile success continues, albeit badly in need of support, and the wealthy countries of the Gulf have managed to maintain stability at home as they become more assertive in regional politics, often beyond the Gulf into the Levant and North Africa. In his remarkable interview with *The Atlantic Magazine*,² the President found fault with several Arab leaders (as well as the Israeli Prime Minister) and defended his 2013 decision to step back from an attack on Syrian chemical facilities, despite his earlier definition of a 'red line.' The analysis suggests that the President is not focused on the criticism of the public debate, but uses his own metrics to determine what has worked or failed, and why.

The Centrality of Syria

The catastrophic war in Syria and its spillover effects in the region and in Europe has dominated

¹ Barack OBAMA, *Remarks by the President at Cairo University*, 2009 www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-President-cairo-university-6-04-09

² GOLDBERG Geoffrey, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016. www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/

any discussion of the Middle East over the past year. Outside actors had to make hard choices about whether the more immediate priority was defeating the Islamic State from its control of territory in Syria and Iraq, or the established principle of ending the Assad regime and beginning a political transition for Syria.

The Russian decision to surge military support for Assad in September 2015 changed the situation on the ground in favour of the regime, but its intervention, which ended in early 2016, paradoxically also helped create conditions for a return to the UN negotiations process, rather than an outright victory for the regime. In February 2016, after intense diplomacy between the US and Russian Foreign Ministers, a ceasefire began. Talks under UN auspices resumed in April 2016, based on a probably fragile convergence of interests among outside powers, and a sober realism by the opposition and the government that there were no alternatives.

In the United States, the debate over Syria sharpened with the launch of the 2016 Presidential campaign. Republican critics saw America's reluctance to use force in response to the use of chemical weapons in 2013 as a loss of the nation's credibility and power, and some candidates have argued for a more decisive military intervention in support of opposition forces and against the Islamic State. In the Democrats' camp, the leading candidates, Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, have not found fault with the President's approach, although some liberals would favour a more robust intervention for humanitarian purposes. All politicians, however, are attuned to a general fatigue in the population and reluctance to begin any new military adventures.

The administration has played a leadership role internationally in support of humanitarian aid to the Syrian refugees and, to the extent possible, to the displaced within Syria. US aid in fiscal year 2015 was over \$1.6 billion, by far the largest single donor, but close to the combined aid from the UK, European Commission and Germany. Throughout 2015, US resources underutilized in other parts of the world were redirected to Syrian refugee accounts, and development officials sought ways to creatively repurpose development assistance for the longer term needs of the refugees and displaced, as well as for the host countries where services are overwhelmed by the size of the refugee population.

The Iran Nuclear Agreement: a Clear Win for the Administration

For the Obama team, the successful completion of a nuclear agreement with Iran stands out as a clear win. It was a shared diplomatic achievement, led by the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. It built on an earlier EU effort (2003-5) to engage Iran to see the trade-offs between their nuclear activities that were not in compliance with their obligations as a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and their economic interests in seeing the increasingly draconian sanctions imposed by the international community lifted. For the Obama Administration, the agreement was a major foreign policy achievement that could be counted as both a Middle East security success and a contribution to global non-proliferation goals.

The introduction to the agreement signed on July 23, 2015, states

..."this historic Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), (which) will ensure that Iran's nuclear programme will be exclusively peaceful, and mark a fundamental shift in their approach to this issue. They anticipate that full implementation of this JCPOA will positively contribute to regional and international peace and security. Iran reaffirms that under no circumstances will Iran ever seek, develop or acquire any nuclear weapons."

Both Iran and the United States faced domestic criticism for the agreement, but the US Congress was unable to manoeuvre legislatively to block it by a mid-September deadline, and the Iranian Majles presented a favourable report to the government in October, permitting the parties to work to implementation, which officially began in January 2016.

The Iran agreement raised deep and enduring anxieties among America's security partners in the Middle East, particularly in Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Despite their earlier insistence that a nuclear armed Iran would be an existential threat, some later concluded that an Iran free of sanctions, even without nuclear weapons, remained a formidable adversary, and that the West needed to provide material and political reassurances that Iran would not be able to pursue what they saw as its hegemonic ambitions.

To provide such reassurances, the United States initiated a new summit process with the Heads of

State of the GCC. On 14 May, 2015, the President convened the Gulf leaders at Camp David; a second summit took place in Riyadh on 21 April, 2016. These meetings have been at least partly effective in building stronger personal relationships, but criticism abounds that the region has lost confidence in American leadership because of President Obama's willingness to publicly acknowledge differences in values and in policy preferences.

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At the same time, the United States has agreed to deepen intelligence and security cooperation with these partners, negotiating an estimated \$33 billion in new weapons sales since May 2015, including ballistic missile defence systems, attack helicopters, advanced frigates and anti-armour missiles. It is estimated that the total value of new US arms sales during the eight years of the Obama Administration is three times the size of sales under the George W. Bush Administration. These new transactions raise the prospect of a new arms race, since Iran will be able to resume defence modernization and to address its current disadvantages with the more advanced arsenals in the Arab world and Israel. But Iran is unlikely any time soon to obtain Western-quality defence goods; its most likely suppliers are Russia and China, and its national security officials could determine that Iran is better served by continuing its focus on asymmetric and non-conventional warfare.

No Progress on Palestine-Israel Issues

By 2015, the administration had largely given up on intense diplomacy to engage Israel and the Palestinian Authority, despite its own assessment that it was an urgent task to keep alive the prospect for a

viable two-state solution. Secretary Kerry, who personally led an initiative in 2013-2014 against all odds, spoke in late 2015 of the strategic pessimism he found in the region. Addressing the annual Saban Forum at the Brookings Institution on 15 December, 2015,³ Secretary Kerry said

"The status quo is simply not sustainable. And the fact is that current trends including violence, settlement activity, demolitions, are imperilling the viability of a two-state solution. And that trend has to be reversed in order to prevent this untenable one-state reality from taking hold. I can't stress this enough. The terrorist attacks are devastating the hopes of Israelis who want to believe that peace is possible, and the violence must stop."

He made it clear that difficult decisions had to be made by the leaders, who did not seem willing or able to take new risks for peace. He also addressed the strengths and limits of the American role: "We can help shape. We can support. We can provide a foundation which will give them confidence that if they do X, Y, or Z we will be there....And I think the United States always plays a very critical role in providing that kind of assurance."

Trying to Keep the Arab Spring Alive?

The administration has witnessed the enthusiasm for reform and bottom-up empowerment of individuals in the Arab world turn into a chaotic and confusing landscape for change. But senior officials take the long view, and believe that the demographic pressures and globalization effects will eventually lead to change in state-society relations in the Middle East, as they have in most other parts of the world.

Egypt, the most important Arab partner of the US since the 1970s, has reversed course and is seen by most observers as more authoritarian than it was under Hosni Mubarak. In other countries, such as Libya, the fall of dictators led to security vacuums that have still not been filled. Tunisia alone remains on a path to liberalization, but the lingering authority of old elites, the inexperience of the Islamists, and the failure to act quickly to create new economic opportunities have made even Tunisia vulnerable to violence at home and Islamic State recruitment.

³ KERRY John, *Brookings Institution's 2015 Saban Forum Keynote Address*, www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/12/250388.htm

At the programmatic level, the United States has found it difficult to sustain forms of engagement that had long been hallmarks of US presence in the region, including working with civil society and nascent political parties. Much of that work has been halted, due to resistance from the government, or from inhospitable security conditions. But the US still provides about \$1 billion in economic and technical assistance to a dozen Arab states (not including the \$5.5 billion to Israel, Egypt and Jordan), focusing on diverse needs ranging from education, health, job creation and basic infrastructure, to the essentials of water, energy and food security. The aid relationships increasingly try to look holistically at problem-solving, looking across sectors and engaging the private sector and communities, as well as governments. But the scale of the problem in the region, with growing imbalances between populations and natural resources, often makes it difficult to see the impact of the assistance.

Conclusion: Is the US Role in the Middle East Contracting?

The diplomatic activism of the Obama Administration in 2015 towards Syria, the Iran nuclear agreement, and towards the GCC and Israel, belies the conventional view that the US is retrenching from the region. Despite a public debate that tends to see any setback as a failure, the track record of the administration in the volatile Middle East will be more textured and nuanced over time.

The Middle East will always have strategic importance due to its geopolitical value as global transit for energy and trade, its historic and religious-cultural ties to Europe and America, and its capacity to spread its problems beyond its boundaries. Any global actor ignores the Middle East at its peril. A future American President will not have the luxury of radically changing the American posture and various forms of engagement in the region, but may well continue the gradual recalibration already underway. President Obama has tried to right-size America's commitments, to encourage regional leaders to lead, and to avoid letting Middle Eastern problems with no apparent early solutions dominate his foreign policy. Rising energy independence adds to

the logic of a recalibration of American presence, at least by a few degrees. For some, this is a healthy adjustment of priorities, for others a flawed logic that will turn out to be very costly for the United States, as other powers, regional or external, take advantage of a possible downsizing of US presence. And in 2015 the President was forced to adjust his own plans, authorizing increases in combat and training forces for the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

It is clear from defence planning documents and analysis of national security experts that the gradual realignment of American priorities towards the Asia-Pacific region is underway. The downsizing of US armed forces overall will affect the size and frequency of deployments to the Middle East, although seasonal visits for joint exercises and training will continue to be a constant feature of US-Middle East security cooperation. Nonetheless, the bureaucracy is starting to internalize the notion that the Middle East is less important in 2016 and beyond than it has been for the last quarter of a century. It is a matter of degrees, not a wild swing of the pendulum, and will be manifest in subtle ways, in competition for assistance resources and senior official visits, for example. It has also affected the tone of interactions with leaders and opinion shapers in the region; they overstate the current reality, but see a trend line that is worrisome.

The United States faces both acute and enduring challenges in meeting the expectations of its own public and the governments and societies of the Middle East. The US seeks to protect its interests and help shape events in the region to defuse conflict and work towards peace, while influential voices in the region often have wildly divergent views as to whether the US is doing too much or too little, or supporting the right or wrong forces. Even among moderate, pro-American governments, there is rarely consensus or satisfaction with the American role. President Obama's successor may try to shift the focus in different ways, perhaps to try Israel-Palestine peacemaking again, or to expand the war against the Islamic State. Over time, however, the realities of the region and new insights into the limitations of American power and influence will prevail, and continue to shape the confounding engagement of America in the Middle East.