

Obama and the Arab Spring: The Strategic Confusion of a Realist-Idealist

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The Obama Presidency desire for an improved U.S. relationship with the Arab world has not been realized. Anti-Americanism is, if anything, more pronounced in the region than it was under George W. Bush's government. Weary of frustrating and costly military and diplomatic engagement in the region, the Administration seeks to pivot foreign policy attention to Asia. President Obama Middle East policy is increasingly cautious, contradictory and confused. The Administration's response to the Arab Spring belies much of the optimism generated by his famous 2009 Cairo Speech.

Obama's ambivalent and erratic Mideast policy is driven by a multiplicity of factors that include his aversion to military force, his realist-idealist vision of a post American world, and his inability to prioritize and reconcile strategic interests. These forces have progressively driven the Administration to disengage from the region. The Administration's failure to secure a long term security agreement with Iraq resulted in the removal of U.S. combat troops in 2011 that has contributed immeasurably to Iraqi instability. Today Iraq is again teetering on sectarian civil war as Baghdad faces a resurgent Al Qaeda. President Obama's reluctance to fully engage U.S. military and diplomatic power in the Mideast has exacerbated regional instability and alienated traditional allies. The rising sectarian conflict and resurgence of jihadist violence within the Arab world has only reinforced Obama's disengagement desires which contribute further to the turmoil.

Having pursued an early engagement strategy that has failed to achieve a reset in America's relationship with the Arab World, Obama's current Mideast policy embraces strategic restraint content to contain the raging violence across the region. Such a position dramatically alters the initial trajectory of the Administration's original policies expressed in his Cairo address.

Barak Obama's 2009 speech at Cairo's Al Azhar University was described as "historic" and was intended to dramatically improve America's relationship with the Muslim world. The speech's setting was seen as an appropriate choice given the academic institution reputation in the Arab world. The decision was furthered by America's thirty year plus relationship cap stoned by the 1978 Camp David Accords underwritten by immense U.S. financial support.

The speech identified 6 tensions between the West and Islam that needed to be overcome in an environment of "mutual respect" free of stereotypes. The ordering of these tensions provide some clues about his foreign policy priorities with overcoming religious extremism, achieving a comprehensive Arab-Israel peace, and containing nuclear weapons proliferation placed before promoting democracy, protecting women's rights and ensuring the rights of religious minorities.

In his Cairo speech Obama pledges to restart the Arab-Israel peace process aiming for a two state solution based on 1967 borders. He rejects outside military intervention as a means to promote democracy stating that his opposition to the 2003 Iraq war does not lesson his commitment to democratic government, regime transparency, the rule of law and civil liberties [1]. Obama in his speech commits his Administration support for democracy and human rights and urges its spread across the Arab Middle East. Beyond moral exhortation, Obama's address offers scant guidance of

how regional democratization will emerge, other than in it should be a natural organic process facilitated by global economic and cultural forces.

The President's address was enthusiastically received. His Cairo speech was interpreted as a wholesale rejection of U.S. support for Arab autocracy and seemed to raise expectations that Obama would support democratic movements. What many failed to read in the speech (soaring rhetoric aside) was the rank ordering of tensions in the address, his past writings, and Obama's nebulous view of democracy promotion.

Democracy activists soon saw that Obama's words were not backed by deeds in which strategic interests (combating terrorism, achieving an Arab-Israel peace, engagement of Iran and Syria trumped democracy, women's rights, and the repression of religious minorities [2]. The 2009 disputed Iranian elections that inspired massive protests and severe state repression were only tepidly criticized by the Obama Administration out of fear that harsh criticism would scuttle international efforts to engage Iran and contain the development of its nuclear program. The recent nuclear deal to "freeze" Iran's nuclear program for six months in exchange for lightening economic sanctions against Tehran underscores this commitment.

Arab democracy activists were similarly disappointed by the U.S. government's policy in Egypt [3]. The Administration's lukewarm criticism of election fraud during Egypt's parliamentary elections, its non-reaction to Mubarak's decision to run for a fourth presidential term and his Administration's unwillingness to use U.S. financial support to nudge democratic reform enraged many activists. Here too the Administration feared democratic reform could imperil the fight against Islamic extremism and derail its efforts to reinvigorate the Arab-Israel peace process.

The Administration's hesitancy harkens back to previous Presidents that saw reform efforts complicating Mideast peace efforts [4]. Advocates of accelerating Mideast peace believe that democratic ideals would be easier to push once a two state solution was achieved. Obama's reluctance to strongly support democratic movements received its greatest test in the Arab revolts of January 2011 that in little more than a month toppled the autocratic Tunisian and Egyptian regimes.

Egypt was especially difficult for Obama as his Administration waffled from early support for Mubarak to encouragement that he be

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removed from power [5,6]. The Administration was surprised by the mass Tahir Square protests and feared the resulting turmoil could disrupt Egypt's support for the Camp David Accords. Faced with Mubarak's fall, Obama sought to facilitate the military government's transition to democracy and free elections. The Administration's efforts to balance strategic interests with humanitarian impulses proved difficult to implement in the Egyptian case.

In his *Audacity of Hope* book the President describes himself as a realist-idealist [7]. This philosophical framework may explain the fluctuations in the Administration's approach across the region that has veered between democracy promotion and preservation of core strategic interests. Obama's ambivalence toward an assertive role in the region is also facilitated in his belief in a post American world order. Under this conception, the U.S. is in relative decline and must act in concert with a host of national and international actors to resolve key problems. Given financial constraints, innate limits to American power and commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. could ill afford another costly military intervention.

The February 2011 Libyan revolt accordingly put the Administration in a bind: faced with fears of a mass slaughter and calls by France, Britain, the UN and the Arab League for international action, a reluctant Administration relented and supported military action against Qaddafi's repressive government. True to his vision of a post American world, Obama sought to get France and Britain, despite their inferior military assets, to take the lead. This was underscored by an initial American participation that gave way to the French and British dominance in the final stages of the war.

As the war labored on for over 6 months the Administration equivocated over the purpose of the Operation Odyssey Dawn's mission and the scope of American involvement, the Administration consistently narrowed its goals and limited its participation [8]. Obama's timidity irritated his French and British cohorts who became puzzled about American resolve. Criticized for "leading from behind", the Administration was on the defensive until rebels seized Tripoli and Qaddafi was killed by enraged rebels.

The Administration's caution toward supporting mass protests was repeated in Yemen, Bahrain and in Syria where the fight against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the loss of the 5th Fleet port on the island nation and fear of chaos in Damascus trumped human rights and democracy. Obama's Cairo speech favoring democratic reform increasing clashed with his Administration's inaction, leading many critics to question what Obama's views were on the Arab Spring [9].

Faced with criticism about the sincerity of his government's support for democratic movements, the President was forced to address the issue. His May 19, 2011 State Department speech sought to clarify his position on the Arab Spring and lay out a set of policies in support of Mideast democratization. While lacking the eloquence of his Cairo speech, the address elevates democratic reform to a "core" interest [10].

Using Osama bin Laden death and American disengagement from Iraq as a spring board to discuss America's response to the Arab Spring, the President repudiates past policies of U.S. support for autocratic governments. Democratic reform he argues can no longer be sacrificed in the name of Mideast peace, oil or the fight against terrorism and that "America's failure to speak to the broader interests of ordinary people in the region will only feed the suspicion that the United States, festering for years pursues our interests at

their expense" [11]. The speech recognizes the historic nature of the Arab protest movements and pledges political, economic and moral support for democratization.

The address, however, is ambiguous and continues to talk about balancing competing interests. The speech's emphasis on achieving a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian issue takes a prominence that is likely to eclipse any support for democratic reform. Obama's Mideast strategy after his May 19th address has been inconsistent and erratic in its support for democratization and has failed to counter growing regional turmoil. Secretary of State John Kerry's optimism about the potential for a comprehensive peace in the region is not shared by either the Israeli government or the Palestinian Authority.

The Administration has supported transitions in Egypt and Yemen that feature prominent roles for elites associated with the former autocratic regime [12,13]. This is reinforced by Obama's refusal to describe the July 2013 Egyptian military's overthrow of the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood regime as a military coup. While it has called for the release of Brotherhood officials including former President Mohammad Morsi, the U.S. government has avoided any direct confrontation with the new military regime. Significantly the Obama Administration's suspension of foreign aid to Cairo excludes anti-terrorism assistance and money to secure Egypt's borders with Israel. Islamist inspired violence in the Sinai since July 2013 is likely to further, not diminish some U.S.-Egyptian security cooperation.

Obama's pro-democracy policy, moreover, contains no initiatives for Gulf Kingdoms to democratize. Clearly cognizant of Iran's growing regional influence in a post American Iraq, the Administration needs Saudi support for its containment policies vis-à-vis Tehran. Despite the lack of democracy in the Gulf, the Administration has signed major arms deals with Sunni Sheikdoms to fortify its Iran containment policy.

The Administration's reticence to fully support democratic transitions is not without merit. The resurgence of terrorist campaigns in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya jeopardize American interests in fighting religious extremism, protecting women and religious minorities and pushing for a final resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict [14,15]. The Arab Spring has produced dangerous security vacuums across the region aggravated by the U.S. reluctance to fully use American military and diplomatic power. The Administrations conflicted, incoherent strategy toward Syria, furthermore, reflects a fear of instability and chaos, and the emergence of al-Qaeda terror safe haven in a post Assad era. Having declared that Assad must leave power two years ago, having provided economic and military support for Syrian rebels, and having announced that Damascus' use of chemical weapons was an unacceptable "red line", Obama has failed to take concrete action to secure the regime's overthrow.

Obama fears the unintended consequences of U.S. military intervention in Syria and the destabilizing impact of a post Assad failed state. Indeed, the Administration's support for the UN's fall 2013 effort to "dismantle" Syria's chemical weapons program and Obama's recent suspension of military aid to Syrian rebels increasingly dominated by Islamist extremists reinforces Assad's military and political position. Today the Baathist regime in Damascus aided by Iran and Hezbollah is gaining considerable military ground against the fractured Sunni rebels. Some advisors close to the Administration have quietly urged reengagement with the Assad regime seeing him preferable to an Al Qaeda dominated Syria.

Recent developments in Libya, Egypt, and Iraq and the emergence of al-Qaeda affiliates across the region create potential terror safe havens damaging to U.S. strategic interests. Having supported democratic change the Administration is now apprehensive about an arc of instability engulfing the region and the rising jihadist tide. Obama's reluctance to employ U.S. political and military power, however, exacerbates Middle Eastern turmoil and undermines the preservation of U.S. strategic interests. There is, in short, a mismatch between policy goals and concrete action.

President Obama's Iran policy is emblematic of his inability to protect America's core strategic interests. His support for a tenuous long-term agreement to limit Tehran's nuclear program above all other interests has alienated Sunni Gulf allies and Israel both fearful of a nuclearized Iran. The Administration has become so confused over what regional approach to pursue that it fears taking authoritative action letting events drift disastrously. Its policy of "strategic restraint" increasingly jeopardizes its efforts to preserve Israeli and Gulf security and derail Iran's nuclear program. The Administration's abrupt cancellation of planned military strikes against Damascus for its use of chemical weapons last September in favor of a Russian backed chemical weapons disarmament plan must reassure Iran that the U.S. government is unlikely to attack Tehran's nuclear facilities if it breaches the recent accord freezing its program. The President's strategic restraint policy in the Middle East has contributed to growing regional unrest [16]. Paralyzed by fear, pandering to partisan "anti-war" constituencies, the Administration has alienated Sunni Gulf allies and Israel, and its erratic policies have contributed immeasurably to growing regional chaos.

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