



It's complicated

The Israeli-Palestinian status quo is in none of the parties' interests, especially as the rest of the Middle East is becoming ever more unpredictable

FOUR YEARS is a long time in the life of a presidency. It's an especially long time in the life of Middle East politics. These two truisms poignantly intersected in late March with Barack Obama's first visit as US president to Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Four years ago, the newly installed Obama Administration entered office determined to chart a new policy course towards the Middle East: ending US combat operations in Iraq, establishing a path to exiting Afghanistan, adjusting the "war on terror" to make it commensurate with American values, engaging Iran's rulers regarding its nuclear program, hitting the reset button in order to repair America's tarnished image in the Muslim world, and achieving an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, deemed a sine qua non for advancing the rest of America's Middle East agenda.

These goals were poignantly expressed in Obama's Cairo University speech that spring, and tangibly manifested in his (unproductive) confrontation with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over freezing settlement construction.

Halfway through his first term, Arab societies suddenly awoke to challenge their authoritarian rulers. Although Hosni Mubarak had been a stalwart American ally, the dramatic calls for freedom and democracy from Tahrir Square were too powerful to ignore: the US, said Obama, would be on "the right side of history," and Mubarak, like the pro-Western Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali before him in Tunisia, would have to stand down. America's enlightened self-interest, it was thought, required embracing the forces of change, the new Arab awakening, that was cascading back and forth across the region.

Two plus years later, and with one four-year term under its belt, where does the region, and the efforts to advance US interests and goals there, stand? Newly installed Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel's succinct



US President Barack Obama: New possibilities may be on the horizon

JASON REED / REUTERS

characterization of the Afghanistan situation – "it's complicated" – seems apt.

Post-Mubarak Egypt faces permanent political and economic crisis, lacking the cohesion necessary to establish a legitimate constitutional framework and durable social contract. Ironically, all of Egypt's rival forces – Islamists, secular Nasserite nationalists, regime holdovers and liberals, blame the US for supporting their competitors.

Post-Qaddafi Libya is a country of armed factions. Yemen remains a failed state. Bahrain, where US desires for democratization were blocked, is sullen. Iraq is a factionalized, perpetually warring polity – Lebanon writ large. Tunisia, still the best hope for successful democratization, is perched precariously between conflict and comity.

The Palestinians remain divided into two de facto entities, with Gaza-based Hamas deeply rooted, and the Palestinian

Authority's President Mahmoud Abbas weaker than ever among his constituents. The Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic process remains stalled. Biting international sanctions notwithstanding, the Iranian regime shows no inclination to desist from its nuclear program.

And, finally, there is Syria: two years of increasingly brutal, and increasingly sectarian, conflict has produced at least 70,000 deaths and one million refugees, threatens to engulf Lebanon, possibly spill over into its other neighbors, and increasing pressure on the US to forcefully lead an international intervention to topple the tottering but determined Bashar Assad regime, along the lines of the interventions in Libya, Bosnia and Kosovo.

On the face of it then, focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at this juncture would seem myopic. But paradoxically, it may be a ripe moment for progress. The status quo on the ground is widely recognized as fragile and flammable. There is a broad consensus among Israel's security establishment around the need to take new initiatives, including what is called "coordinated unilateralism," to create a two-state dynamic. While the issue was mostly ignored during the Israeli election campaign, the election results were more "centrist" than expected, and indicate a political constellation can be constructed that could support such measures. The PA leadership is desperately in need of new horizons, before it is too late.

Hence, while the Obama visit will outwardly be longer on style than substance, new possibilities may be on the horizon, if only because of the recognition that the indefinite continuation of the status quo is in none of the parties' interests, especially as the rest of the Middle East is becoming ever more complicated. ■

The author is a Principal Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University.