

Obama's Visit and America's Middle East Policies

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President Barack Obama's whirlwind visit to Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Jordan, coming at the beginning of his second term in office, compels a close reading of American policy in the Middle East. The importance of the visit is magnified in light of the questions that America's local allies have regarding the willingness of the Obama Administration to decisively address the pressing geopolitical challenges confronting the region. The visit is designed to lay out a more pragmatic, less idealistic set of policy parameters that will reassure America's allies in the region that the US understands the issues at stake and is prepared to deal with them.

To be sure, one of the core goals of Obama's visit is to spark the renewal of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. However, unlike his high-profile visits to Turkey and Egypt at the beginning of his first term that were explicitly designed to refurbish America's tattered image in the Muslim world,¹ this time the Obama administration has sought to lower expectations, emphasizing that it does not possess a magic solution to the conflict or a new peace plan to promote. Successive US Administrations have invested a great deal of material and moral support in the Palestinian Authority since its inception in 1994. However, in light of recent developments in the Palestinian sphere and the continued stalemate in the peace process, it seems that a continuation along the

¹ He also briefly visited Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

current policy path may lead to the PA's collapse. The visit is thus designed to return Abbas and the Palestinian Authority to center stage, to counter-balance the increasing popularity and prestige of Hamas. To that end, Obama is likely to seek, albeit quietly, an Israeli-Palestinian understanding that will result in the curbing of settlement construction in exchange for the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, which have been in a state of deep freeze. In so doing, the US president will be attempting to resuscitate a central element of US Middle East policy for the last two decades, dating back to the Oslo Accords, namely the promotion of peaceful outcome to the long-running conflict, based on a two-state solution.

Of course, restarting negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority is not the only vital matter on Obama's Middle East agenda. His commitment to preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons, has been consistent from the outset of his presidency, but the verdict is still out on whether he will succeed to doing so, no small burden for a president who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and has spoken in the past about the need to ultimately rid the world of nuclear weapons. The failure of the 5+1 talks on Iran's program held last month in Kazakhstan and the shadow cast by North Korea's recent nuclear test, missile launches and bellicose rhetoric reinforce widespread skepticism regarding the ability to ultimately prevent Iran from achieving nuclear capability. A nuclear Iran is a nightmarish vision for the US's regional allies: not just Israel, but also Saudi Arabia and its allied Gulf states, Jordan and Turkey. Saudi Arabia's foreign minister Sa'ud al-Faysal recent statement - "we hope that the negotiations will result in putting an end to this problem rather than containing it"² - indicated the high level of Saudi anxiety and doubt regarding the degree of America's resoluteness.

To be sure, the Obama administration's declared position remains unchanged: the employment of biting sanctions against Iran to induce it to resolve the issue diplomatically, while reiterating that "all options are still on the table." But Obama's latest statement on the issue, given to an Israeli television interviewer,

² Prince Saud al-Faisal, *The Telegraph*, March 4, 2013

appears to indicate that a policy adjustment is underway: "Right now, we think it would take over a year or so for Iran to actually develop a nuclear weapon, but obviously we don't want to cut it too close."³ In the past, Obama has avoided laying out a specific time frame for addressing the issue. In doing so now, he sought to make clear to all concerned, especially Israel, that he has a plan of action and is committed to coordinating his moves with US allies.

The Iranian issue notwithstanding, Obama's visit comes against the background of even more dramatic developments in the region: the ongoing regional upheaval caused by the misnomered "Arab Spring".⁴ In the modern history of the Middle East, Western countries have more than once confronted the dilemma posed when geo-strategic interests clashed with values and ideals. The events of the "Arab Spring" highlighted anew the inherent tension between the two. Consequently, American policies towards regional issues, and particularly the challenges posed to existing regimes, have suffered from inconsistency. In fact there is no overall, coherent American strategy regarding the new developments in the region. The US was among the first to support the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, applauding what it saw was a march towards the creation of more democratic and pluralistic societies. Yet these countries, led by Islamist parties, are embroiled in uncertainty, struggling to establish workable institutional frameworks and political stability against the background of internal social and political conflicts and major disagreement over the role of Islam in determining the shape of the new political order. In its attempt to keep with the pace of developments in Tunisia and Egypt, the Obama administration made it clear that political behavior and not ideology would be the determining factor in its approach towards these political parties.⁵

³ Barack Obama, Israeli Channel Two TV, March 14, 2013

⁴ Asher Susser, "The Arab Spring: The Origins of a Misnomer," *Tel Aviv Notes*, Vol. 6, No. 6, March 26, 2012.

⁵ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced in November 2011 that, "the manner in which the parties define themselves is not as important to us as their actions." Bradley Klapper, "Championing Democracy, Clinton Says US Can Work with Islamist Parties Gaining from Arab Spring," *Associated Press*, November 8, 2011.

More immediately problematic is the ever more bloody war in Syria. There, American policy is caught between the legacy of the past decade, namely the need to avoid further, costly military engagements and some form of Libyan-style, “leading from behind” actions which would topple the Asad regime, a declared goal. In recent months, as the level of carnage rose substantially, the US increasingly recognized that its failure to intervene on behalf of the Syrian rebels was further damaging its image as the long-proclaimed defender of democracy and human rights. Moreover, further inaction appeared likely to carry long-term costs to its interests, regardless of the shape that a post-Asad Syria might take. These underlying interests, of course, included promoting regional stability, defeating jihadi Islamism, eliminating state sponsors of terrorism, and curbing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, it has remained reluctant to forcefully tip the military balance in favor of the Syrian rebels by providing them with advanced weaponry.

The US is now well aware that the increasingly visible presence of radical Islamist forces in Syria, the rising sectarian tension between Sunnis and Shi`is across the Fertile Crescent, and the increased burden on staunch US ally Jordan posed by the influx of massive numbers of Syrian refugees is deeply disturbing not only to Jordan but to all of the US’s regional allies. The Saudis in particular have not hesitated to criticize Washington on the grounds that its approach to the region is essentially one geared to down-sizing American involvement, resulting in the negative developments enumerated above, coupled with Iran’s continued drive for a nuclear weapon.

The president's visit to Israel and the region is intended, therefore, to reassure its regional partners of the United States’ commitment to their security and well-being, and to clarify that notwithstanding America’s primary focus on its domestic challenges, the Obama administration possesses both the intention and capability to effectively address the region's pressing problems.

Overall, the Middle East is awash in uncertainty, posing new challenges to Israel but also, perhaps, new opportunities as well. Obama’s first presidential visit

offers Israel the opportunity to strengthen its strategic relationship with the US at this delicate moment. Assuming that the US policy towards the new regional challenges will be one that requires intensified cooperation among its regional allies, Israel has assets to offer in this regard. Israel's inclusion in such a network would contribute to a much-needed improvement in Israeli-Turkish relations, as well as helping to preserve Israel's peace treaties with Jordan and Egypt.

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