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Report

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Obama's Middle East Policy: Time to Decide

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President Obama came into office with a clear international priority: fixing America's faltering Middle East foreign policy. With two ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a disaffected Middle East, the continuous simmering terrorist threat, disenfranchised allies, emboldened regional rivals and the perpetually floundering Israeli-Palestinian peace process, this was a mammoth task. Alongside the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the incoming president's Middle East goals focused on: rebuilding America's soft power and standing in the region; engaging immediately in a more even handed way in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and lastly, devising a more pragmatic and realist strategy to curtail Iran's nuclear ambitions.

After a year in office no major breakthrough has occurred. Iran is still pursuing nuclear technology, prospects for an Israeli-Arab peace are unrealised and, while anti-Americanism in the region seems less pronounced than under Bush, the threat of terrorism is still alive and well. Perhaps it would be Pollyannish to hope for progress after only 12 months and this article will not seek to sensationally or prematurely grade Obama's achievements. Instead it seeks to provide an assessment of whether during his first year of presidency, Obama has effectively laid the groundwork for future policy successes, simply prevented an explosive situation from getting worse or actually overseen a regression in the region.

IT'S SOFT POWER, STUPID

Seven years of Bush's 'War on Terror', with its divisive rhetoric, misguided war in Iraq and unlawful treatment of prisoners left America's reputation in the Middle East in tatters. Recognizing that the US had exhausted its reserves of soft power, a key Obama priority once in office was to replenish them. The language of the new administration sought to show Middle Eastern leaders and the Arab street alike that Washington was now keener to listen than to lecture.

The first visible shift of the Obama presidency was in its rhetoric. Determined to reach out and re-engage with the Arab and Muslim world, Obama gave his first interview as president to Al-Arabiyya, an Arab satellite station. In a revealing passage, he pointed out that part of his new job was to "communicate the fact that the United States has a stake in the well-being of the Muslim world, that the language we use has to be a language of respect". The President reiterated this message with even greater effect during his Cairo speech a few months later where he repeatedly quoted the Koran and called for a "new beginning between the United States and Muslims".

Alongside this change in rhetoric, Obama sought to redefine the parameters of the 'War on Terror' and how this should be fought. Rather than fighting a nebulous war against worldwide Islamofascism, America would now be engaged in a clearly defined war against a "far-reaching network of violence and hatred", as Obama labelled Al-Qaeda in his inaugural speech. The focus has shifted to a counter insurgency/counter terrorism campaign in Afghanistan, rather than pursuing an open ended war against terrorism which was sending ripples across the Middle East.

Furthermore, forceful strategies of democracy promotion abroad were shelved whilst respecting human rights at home was emphasised. During his first weeks Obama symbolically issued executive orders requiring the closure of the Guantanamo detention camp along with banning torture and enhanced interrogation techniques. These moves were intimately tied with his desire to re-establish America's international legitimacy and restore its capacity to lead by example. Rather than bullying Middle Eastern countries into democratic reform as was Bush's want, Obama adopted a more hands off approach. 2009 saw silence from the White House during Iran's post-election protests, limited intervention in Lebanon's parliamentary polls and the adoption of narrower military objectives in Afghanistan rather than ambitious democratization goals.

Yet a shift in rhetoric can only go so far in rebuilding US credibility in the region. The Muslim world continues to scrutinize the President's actions as much as his speeches. 24-hour news channels broadcasting images of US troops still fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, not to mention Israelis in the West Bank and Gaza, serve to undermine any message of reconciliation. Obama's quiet abandonment of democracy advocacy, highlighted by recent congressional cuts in democracy and governance aid for Middle Eastern states, similarly risks increasing cynicism towards the administration's new approach. Whilst Bush's democracy promotion at gunpoint was detested, the Obama administration's continued support for unpopular dictators such as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, its propping up of Mahmoud Abbas' legally-questionable presidential mandate extension, and the near-farcical acceptance of Hamid Karzai's fraudulent re-election in Afghanistan have dampened any Muslim optimism Obama may have earned in Cairo.

Moreover, recent events have shown the fragility of the new administration's rhetorical shift. Under pressure from Republican critics after the attempted Christmas Day Detroit flight bombing, Obama vowed to, "...use every element of our national power to disrupt, to dismantle and to defeat the violent extremists who threaten us, whether they are from Afghanistan or Pakistan, Yemen or Somalia; or anywhere..." He might be able to persuade liberal supporters back home that this is not a return to Bush's neo-conservatism, but such language will not endear him to a Muslim world increasingly doubting the authenticity of his rhetoric.

Obama is burdened by the weight of expectation of a Muslim world who hoped he would not only reverse the hostility of the Bush years but somehow surpass

previous US leaders in the Middle East. The reality they face, that Obama has simply returned to the realism of previous administrations, is a bitter pill to swallow. Whilst a foreign policy success in the Muslim world could still consolidate the raised expectations of his Cairo speech, the longer they must wait, the more Obama is in danger of squandering this newly earned soft power.

THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS: TREADING WATER

It was widely hoped that one such success could be in Israel-Palestine. Seen as a keystone to defusing tension in the Middle East and improving America's regional standing, Obama has wasted no time in tackling the festering Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Indeed, while the Clinton and W. Bush presidencies waited several years before confronting the problem, Obama engaged from day one. His first international phone call as President was to Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, immediately followed by calls to then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah II of Jordan. On his second day in office he named George Mitchell, famed for his successful role in the Northern Ireland peace process, as Middle East special envoy.

Obama has struck a more realist tone than previous administrations in his dealings with Tel Aviv, seemingly recognising that unconditional support for Israel, and its continued occupation and settlement expansion of the West Bank, is not in the US's national interest. Seeking to pursue a more even handed approach to the peace process, Obama has pressured and cajoled the Netanyahu government to abandon its continued construction of illegal settlements. Such constant US pressure mounted on the reluctant Israeli prime minister has seen relations between the two heads of state sink to a surprising low over the past year.

Yet despite this astute recognition of the importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Obama's interest has not produced results. Israel's intransigence, assisted by its sympathetic US lobby, has forced the White

House to a stalemate on settlement freezes. At the same time, the embattled Palestinian Authority (PA) has weakened further. Abbas, already discredited by his embarrassing reversal on the Goldstone report investigating the Gaza War, followed Obama's line on settlements as a condition to resuming peace talks. Having taken a stand, the Palestinian leader is now unable to climb down on the issue, yet Israel will not resume negotiations until he does, effectively freezing the peace process.

Meanwhile Obama has proved unwilling to address the estrangement of Hamas from the PA, leaving all attempts to reconcile the two Palestinian factions to regional proxies like Egypt. Despite the poverty in Gaza brought on by the damage of the 2008/9 conflict and continued blockade, Hamas remains firmly in power and looks soon to enhance its appeal should the proposed prisoner exchange for Gilad Shalit go ahead. Though Obama may have committed renewed energy into resolving the conflict, he has proved unwilling to sacrifice long-standing sacred cows such as engaging with Hamas or exercising real, financial, pressure on Israel.

Whilst some might accuse Obama of naivety in his assessment of these long-standing problems he has also been unlucky. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is arguably at the most fractured it has ever been. The Palestinians are no longer represented by a single viable body, but by two bitterly divided factions, one of which the US considers illegitimate. In Benjamin Netanyahu and his Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman the White House faces one of the most intransigent governments Israel has ever had. Some could argue that the relatively minor concessions already won, the partial settlement freeze and hypothetical acceptance of a future Palestinian state is achievement enough for Obama's first year given the hand dealt to him.

If 2009 has seen Obama frustratingly tread water, in 2010 the President will need to decide if he wants to do more than simply appear to be engaging with the peace process. Whilst renewed shuttle diplomacy and confidence-building measures between Abbas

and Netanyahu could yield minor developments, Obama will need to enforce major sacrifices on each side to make real progress. George Mitchell has recently mooted the withholding of loan guarantees from Israel to pressure Tel Aviv into action, a technique used successfully by George H W Bush in 1991 to push Yitzak Shamir to the Madrid Peace Conference. Yet beyond this, it is unlikely that the more controversial options, such as engaging with Hamas, will be considered. Alternatively Obama might choose to sideline the Palestinian track and sponsor an Israeli-Syrian peace, as has been quietly considered following a comparative softening of Washington's attitude to Damascus in the last year. Having been fought to a stalemate, Obama must assess whether he wants to prepare for a second round or leave things in stasis whilst focusing his energies elsewhere. As analyst David Aaron Miller cynically states, "He doesn't need Arab-Israeli peace to be considered a consequential president."

TESTING A NEW WAY FORWARD WITH IRAN

An even bigger shift has taken place in US foreign policy towards Iran. Obama abandoned Bush's one-dimensional confrontational stance, which had achieved little or nothing, preferring a multidimensional strategy of 'diplomacy, punishment and containment'. Numerous and unprecedented overtures have been made to Teheran, such as the inaugural speech's famous "extended hand", in order to find a diplomatic solution to the nuclear impasse. While finally engaging with Iran, the new US administration also sought to revive international momentum against nuclear proliferation and multilateral support against Iran's nuclear ambitions in forums such as the UN.

Yet the new President has not been naïve. With time running out, Obama recently argued in his Nobel Peace Prize speech that the international community should increase its pressure and enforce sanctions that can "exact a real price" and are "tough enough to actually change behaviour". Parallel to threatening sanctions, his administration has devised a clearer containment strategy. First, deciding to shift the deployment of the European missile shield in favour of strengthening a Middle Eastern missile defence system designed to better intercept Iran's capabilities. Second, by admitting publicly the possibility of extending a 'defence (i.e. nuclear) umbrella' over the Persian Gulf in the event of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.

Complicating this strategy have been the internal struggles within Iran emerging from the disputed summer Presidential elections. Obama's quiet immediately after the Iranian election suggested he hoped protests would subside allowing him to continue his diplomatic engagement with Tehran. As opposition continues, Obama has felt compelled to break his silence, most recently, "condemning the violent and unjust suppression of innocent Iranian citizens," during the Christmas period. On the one hand, Obama knows that any overt public support for the opposition could taint their cause allowing Tehran to portray them as foreign puppets and initiate an even harsher crack down. On the other hand with President Ahmedinejad's government being increasingly stubborn on nuclear negotiations, possibly as a consequence of these internal struggles, US policy makers are aware that an opposition victory might produce a government more willing to negotiate, though perhaps not the pro-Western fantasy that some of its foreign supporters envisage.

Yet waiting and hoping that the opposition triumph and are then willing to negotiate more favourably on the nuclear issue is unpalatable and risks Israel acting alone, possibly with Saudi Arabia's tacit support, to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities. Obama has already threatened "consequences" should

Ahmedinejad reject the latest deal, and, with Tehran ominously silent as the New Year deadline passed, the White House will be under pressure to initiate a new round of sanctions. There remains uncertainty, however, as to what impact sanctions could have. Will they entrench the regime as in Saddam's Iraq? Could they embolden the opposition further or simply provide greater justification for Tehran's crushing of them? Would they actually succeed in halting or delaying Iran's nuclear program or destroy any hopes for cooperation, whilst Tehran becomes even more determined to defy the West and develop the bomb?

Of all the challenges Obama faces in his second year, Iran is expected to be the most pressing. Despite exploring a host of options, including international cooperation, diplomatic engagement and even talking the language of world-wide nuclear disarmament, Obama seems no closer to reaching a settlement with Tehran. He has been unfortunate once more in trying to apply a pragmatic engagement to an Iranian regime even more defiant and confrontational, as a result of internal struggles, than that faced by Bush. The White House is aware of the imprecise science of sanctions, but may find its hand forced into action as the lesser of two evils when compared to an Israeli military strike that could ignite a regional war. Whilst all options remain on the table, the pressure on Obama to produce results will only increase throughout the year.

TIME TO DECIDE

When it comes to foreign policy Obama has proven not a bleeding-heart idealist but a shrewd pragmatic realist with Nixonian echoes. Nowhere has this been more evident than in his Middle Eastern policy: abandoning the democratising rhetoric of Bush, scaling down Iraq, providing limited military objectives for Afghanistan and against Al-Qaeda, opening up to rivals and pressuring allies when this was considered in the national interest.

This pragmatism drove Obama's initial efforts at rebuilding America's soft power in the Muslim World, for which he should be lauded, though any increased legitimacy earned has not been capitalised on. Now is the time for some tough decisions if Obama is to deliver results and avoid becoming a false prophet. To push forward Israeli-Palestinian peace sacred cows may need to be sacrificed such as talking to Hamas, financially pressuring Israel and restarting negotiations with Syria. To progress with Iran decisive action is needed, whether it be renewed diplomatic deals or international pressure and sanctions, that both maximises pressure on Tehran whilst minimising the damage felt by internal protestors.

After years of failures it may take just one major success for Obama to provide a snowball effect in the region upon which the White House can build. Yet the inability to deliver can only serve to increase the diminishing of newly acquired reserves of regional goodwill. Whilst a year of Obama has quelled the fires left by Bush's incendiary foreign policy, and have certainly not made things worse, the 44th President's second year needs tougher decisions if it is to reap the success he seeks. ■