

Obama's Mideast vision: Confusion - Middle East Transparent

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There is great discomfort these days among those who backed Barack Obama's "new" approach to the Middle East when he took office 10 months ago. That shouldn't surprise us. Everything about the president's shotgun approach to the region, his desire to overhaul all policies from the George W. Bush years simultaneously, without a cohesive strategy binding his actions together, was always going to let the believers down.

As the president's accelerated pullout from Iraq begins to look increasingly ill-thought-out, as his engagement of Iran and Syria falters, as Arab-Israeli peace looks more elusive than ever, and as Americans express growing doubts about the war in Afghanistan, Obama is discovering that personal charisma is not enough to alter the realities of a Middle East that has whittled down better men than he.

For the US president, the clearest articulation of his approach to the region was his speech in Cairo last June. However, there was always more mood to that address than substance. The president put out a wish-list of American objectives, padded with reassurances and self-criticism, but there was no solid core to what he said – a discernible sense of the values and overriding political ambitions the United States was building toward. As Obama himself admitted, no single speech could answer all the complex questions the Middle East has tossed up. However, American behavior on the ground has made things no easier to understand, which is why regional uncertainties are turning to bite the administration in the leg.

For example, what is the policy in Iraq? In recent weeks, following the American military withdrawal from Iraqi cities, the upsurge in devastating suicide attacks has threatened to reverse years of efforts by Washington to stabilize the country. Ultimately, Obama's priority can be summed up in one word, reflecting his psychological hesitation to commit to an enterprise that he associates, in a dangerously personalized way, with his predecessor. That word is "withdrawal," and Obama described his Iraqi policy this way in Cairo: "Today, America has a dual responsibility: to help Iraq forge a better future – and to leave Iraq to Iraqis. I have made it clear to the Iraqi people that we pursue no bases, and no claim on their territory or resources. Iraq's sovereignty is its own."

Those were noble thoughts, but how do they square with other American concerns, such as the containment of Iran, the avoidance of sectarian conflict that might engulf the region, the stability of oil supplies, and much else? Obama feels that an America forever signaling its desire to go home will make things better by making America more likable. That's not how the Middle East works. Politics abhor a vacuum, and as everyone sees how eager the US is to leave, the more they will try to fill the ensuing vacuum to their advantage, and the more intransigent they will be when Washington seeks political solutions to prepare its getaway. That explains the upsurge of bombings in Iraq lately, and it

explains why the Taliban feel no need to surrender anything in Afghanistan.

Engagement of Iran and Syria has also come up short, though a breakthrough remains possible. However, there was always something counterintuitive in lowering the pressure on Iran in the hope that this would generate progress in finding a solution to its nuclear program. Engagement is not an end in itself, it is a means to an end among countless others. Where the Obama administration erred was in not seeing how dialogue would buy Iran more time to advance its nuclear projects, precisely what the Iranians wanted, while breaking the momentum of international efforts to force Tehran to concede something – for example temporary suspension of uranium enrichment. For Obama to rebuild such momentum today seems virtually impossible, when the US itself has made it abundantly clear that it believes war is a bad idea.

Attacking Iran is indeed a bad idea, but in the poker game he has been playing with Tehran, Obama didn't need to show all of his cards. He's virtually folded over Iraq, is stumbling in Afghanistan, and does not occupy himself very much with Lebanon, all places where the Iranians can and are hurting the Americans. By placing most of his chips on engagement, the president has failed to develop a more multifaceted strategy while relinquishing other forms of coercion that could have been effective in Washington's bargaining with the Islamic Republic.

On Syria, the US has been more steadfast, particularly in trying to deny Damascus the means to reimpose its will in Lebanon. However, the Assad regime has shown no signs of breaking away from Iran, a major US incentive in re-engaging with the Syrians, even as it has facilitated suicide attacks in Iraq and encouraged Hamas' intransigence in inter-Palestinian negotiations in Cairo. The Obama administration can, of course, take the passive view that Syria is entitled to destabilize its neighbors in order to enhance its leverage; or it can behave like a superpower and make the undermining of vital US interests very costly for Bashar Assad. But it certainly cannot defend its vital interests by adopting a passive approach.

With respect to the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, Obama has taken Israel on over its settlements. It was about time, since the Bush administration's permissiveness on settlement construction neutralized its own "road map". However, there is more to Palestinian-Israeli peace than settlements. Obama is exerting considerable political capital to confront Israel, but it may be capital wasted at a moment when Hamas can still veto any breakthrough from the Palestinian side. In other words, Washington is working on a narrow front whereas its failure to weaken Hamas may render the whole enterprise meaningless. But how can the US weaken Hamas when improving relations with the movement's main regional sponsors, Iran and Syria, remains a centerpiece of American efforts?

Barack Obama's devotees may imagine that because he spent a few years abroad as a boy, he is well equipped to understand our complicated world. Perhaps he is, but his approach to the greater Middle East, shorn of the soaring rhetoric, has been artless and arrogant. The president is being tied up every which way by his foes, who can plainly see that the Obama vision is an unsystematic one. If ever the US has been close to achieving potentially terminal self-marginalization in the region, it is now.

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