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The Arabs Have Stopped Applauding Obama

A foreign policy of penance has won America no friends.

By **FOUAD AJAMI**

'He talks too much,' a Saudi academic in Jeddah, who had once been smitten with Barack Obama, recently observed to me of America's 44th president. He has wearied of Mr. Obama and now does not bother with the Obama oratory.

He is hardly alone, this academic. In the endless chatter of this region, and in the commentaries offered by the press, the theme is one of disappointment. In the Arab-Islamic world, Barack Obama has come down to earth.

He has not made the world anew, history did not bend to his will, the Indians and Pakistanis have been told that the matter of Kashmir is theirs to resolve, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the same intractable clash of two irreconcilable nationalisms, and the theocrats in Iran have not "unclenched their fist," nor have they abandoned their nuclear quest.

There is little Mr. Obama can do about this disenchantment. He can't journey to Turkey to tell its Islamist leaders and political class that a decade of anti-American scapegoating is all forgiven and was the product of American policies—he has already done that. He can't journey to Cairo to tell the fabled "Arab street" that the Iraq war was a wasted war of choice, and that America earned the malice that came its way from Arab lands—he has already done that as well. He can't tell Muslims that America is not at war with Islam—he, like his predecessor, has said that time and again.

It was the norm for American liberalism during the Bush years to brandish the Pew Global Attitudes survey that told of America's decline in the eyes of foreign nations. Foreigners were saying what the liberals wanted said.

Now those surveys of 2009 bring findings from the world of Islam that confirm that the animus toward America has not been radically changed by the ascendancy of Mr. Obama. In the Palestinian territories, 15% have a favorable view of the U.S. while 82% have an unfavorable view. The Obama speech in Ankara didn't seem to help in Turkey, where the favorables are 14% and those unreconciled, 69%. In Egypt, a country that's reaped nearly 40 years of American aid, things stayed roughly the same: 27% have a favorable view of the U.S. while 70% do not. In Pakistan, a place of great consequence for American power, our standing has deteriorated: The unfavorables rose from 63% in 2008 to 68% this year.

Mr. Obama's election has not drained the swamps of anti-Americanism. That anti-Americanism is endemic to this region, an alibi and a scapegoat for nations, and their rulers, unwilling to break out of the grip of political autocracy and economic failure. It predated the presidency of George W. Bush and rages on during the Obama presidency.

We had once taken to the foreign world that quintessential American difference—the belief in liberty, a needed innocence to play off against the settled and complacent ways of older nations. The Obama approach is different.

Steeped in an overarching idea of American guilt, Mr. Obama and his lieutenants offered nothing less than a doctrine, and a policy, of American penance. No one told Mr. Obama that the Islamic world, where American power is engaged and so dangerously exposed, it is considered bad form, nay a great moral lapse, to speak ill of one's own tribe when in the midst, and in the lands, of others.

The crowd may have applauded the cavalier way the new steward of American power referred to his predecessor, but in the privacy of their own language they doubtless wondered about his character and his fidelity. "My brother and I against my cousin, my cousin and I against the stranger," goes one of the Arab world's most honored maxims. The stranger who came into their midst and spoke badly of his own was destined to become an object of suspicion.

Mr. Obama could not make up his mind: He was at one with "the people" and with the rulers who held them in subjugation. The people of Iran who took to the streets this past summer were betrayed by this hapless diplomacy—Mr. Obama was out to "engage" the terrible rulers that millions of Iranians were determined to be rid of.

On Nov. 4, on the 30th anniversary of the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran, the embattled reformers, again in the streets, posed an embarrassing dilemma for American diplomacy: "Obama, Obama, you are either with us or with them," they chanted. By not responding to these cries and continuing to "engage" Tehran's murderous regime, his choice was made clear. It wasn't one of American diplomacy's finest moments.

Mr. Obama has himself to blame for the disarray of his foreign policy. American arms had won a decent outcome in Iraq, but Mr. Obama would not claim it—it was his predecessor's war. Vigilance had kept the American homeland safe from terrorist attacks for seven long years under his predecessors, but he could never grant Bush policies the honor and credit they deserved. He had declared Afghanistan a war of necessity, but he seems to have his eye on the road out even as he is set to announce a troop increase in an address to be delivered tomorrow.

He was quick to assert, in the course of his exuberant campaign for president last year, that his diplomacy in South Asia would start with the standoff in Kashmir. In truth India had no interest in an international adjudication of Kashmir. What was settled during the partition in 1947 was there to stay. In recent days, Mr. Obama walked away from earlier ambitions. "Obviously, there are historic conflicts between India and Pakistan," he said. "It's not the place of the United States to try to, from the outside, resolve those conflicts."

Nor was he swayed by the fate of so many "peace plans" that have been floated over so many decades to resolve the fight between Arab and Jew over the land between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean. Where George W. Bush offered the Palestinians the gift of clarity—statehood but only after the renunciation of terror and the break with maximalism—Mr. Obama signaled a return to the dead ways of the past: a peace process where America itself is broker and arbiter.

The Obama diplomacy had made a settlement freeze its starting point, when this was precisely the wrong place to begin. Israel has given up settlements before at the altar of peace—recall the historical accommodation with Egypt a quarter century ago. The right course would have set the question of settlements aside as it took up the broader challenge of radicalism in the region—the menace and swagger of Iran, the arsenal of Hamas and Hezbollah, the refusal of the Arab order of power to embrace in broad daylight the cause of peace with Israel.

The laws of gravity, the weight of history and of precedent, have caught up with the Obama presidency. We are beyond stirring speeches. The novelty of the Obama approach, and the Obama persona, has worn off. There is a whole American diplomatic tradition to draw upon—engagements made, wisdom acquired in the course of decades, and, yes, accounts to be settled with rogues and tyrannies. They might yet help this administration find its way out of a labyrinth of its own making.

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