

COMMENTARY

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The Obama Doctrine for the Middle East and its Consequences

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First and foremost, the Obama doctrine for the Middle East prioritizes the engagement of the public in the Middle East, rather than the engagement of the states in the region. America's strategic credibility is based, then, on being seen to support populist calls for reform, rather than on supporting its long-time strategic allies. Thus, when choosing between supporting regimes that have been strategic allies or supporting the people demonstrating against those regimes, the Obama administration has taken the side of the demonstrators, arguing that in any case the status quo cannot hold.

It is in this context that Obama's approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict needs to be understood. One might have thought (correctly) that recent events demonstrate that America's only reliable ally in the Middle East is Israel. However, the Obama administration does not see it this way. Rather, it believes that in order to obtain the support of the Muslim-Arab public, the US must be perceived as not only supporting the demonstrators' domestic agenda, but also supporting legitimate Palestinian aspirations.

While less supportive of Israel than his predecessor, George W. Bush, Obama's emphasis on promoting democracy might make it appear that his policies resemble that of the Bush doctrine. However, the Bush doctrine was an assertive American-led strategy to create a "balance of power for freedom" through the use of pre-emptive military force; whereas, the Obama doctrine is essentially defensive in nature, emphasizing, for instance, disengagement from Afghanistan and Iraq. This position was made clear in Obama's 19 May speech. True, the doctrine does call for robust military intervention to prevent grave abuses of human rights, but only in strategically

convenient places like Libya, not in places where the risk (as well as the potential rewards) are much greater – such as Iran and Syria. Such places are subjected only to economic sanctions.

The speech also made clear that under Obama, America will not take the political lead on reform and democratization; rather, it will play a supporting role. The doctrine's primary tool for supporting reform appears to be grand political rhetoric, although Obama has also pledged to support liberalizing economic and political reform by rallying the international community to provide financial support and technical expertise. All of this adds up to a foreign policy doctrine of 'defensive liberalism'.

Assessing the Obama Doctrine: Implications for the US

The doctrine correctly diagnoses one of the main causes of instability and anti-Americanism in the Middle East: namely the stagnant, dysfunctional economic, social and political situation in the Muslim-Arab Middle East. Political and economic reform is a must if the region is to successfully develop. Obama is also correct that this reform is something that must be advanced domestically, with the US in a supporting role.

The problem lies in Obama's grossly over-optimistic assessment of regional realities, which could have dangerous unintended consequences. While admitting that there will be bad days as well as good days, the Obama doctrine rests on a quasi-religious American creed that believes in the inevitable and universal triumph of liberal democracy. For Obama, the 'Arab Spring' recalls the Boston Tea Party and the American Revolution, Rosa Parks and the struggle for civil rights, and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the Eastern European transition to democracy.

Unfortunately, these metaphors tell us more about the admirable side of the American political imagination than they do about the current political struggles in the Middle East.

In 1989, the transition to democracy was successful in countries with a significant liberal tradition grounded in a functioning civil society. The alternative anti-democratic ideology, Communism, had lost all credibility, and the collapse of the Soviet Union left the US in a position of unassailable ideological and strategic dominance. Crucial to that success was a friendly neighbourhood dominated by European countries who provided extensive assistance to facilitate the transition to democracy.

In the Middle East of 2011, although many of the demonstrators are driven by the demand for reform, they lack the deep and widespread ideological and civil society institutional foundations that undergirded success in 1989. Reformers do not live in a neighbourhood populated by robust and generous democracies but rather in a region where leading powers view reform as an existential threat and where the helping hand of the West remains relatively weak and distant.

Islamism represents the most popular alternative ideology to the status quo and the Islamists are inestimably better organized than the democratic reformers.

Thus, in Egypt, it looks like elections will result in a government with much greater Islamist influence, led by former Secretary-General of the Arab League Amr Moussa, a Nasserite Arab nationalist (hardly a true democratic dissident like Vaclav Havel). Such a government is unlikely to promote the kind of vigorous reforms Obama envisages. Moreover, Moussa is likely to pull his country away from the US and closer to Iran, just as Turkey has already done.

Consequently, in assessing the regional standing of the US, far from being a time to rejoice, this is a time for concern. Because what is strategically important is not so much who is demonstrating, but who is likely to politically benefit from these demonstrations. There is good reason to fear that the benefactors will not be the reformers but groups with varying degrees of hostility to the US and its liberal agenda. Meanwhile, in the country most hostile to that agenda, Iran, the regime looks likely to survive and improve its regional standing. Furthermore, all of this is unfolding against a background of the rising power of Hamas and Hezbollah, and the shift of Lebanon and Turkey away from the American orbit while moving closer to Tehran.

Assessing the Obama Doctrine: Implications for Israel

The deepest level of Israeli concern over the 19 May speech is not what Obama said about Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Indeed, much of the specifics were good for Israel. He called for the international community to endorse a peace based on recognition of Israel as a Jewish state and the creation of a non-militarized Palestinian state. He opposed the Palestinians' UN initiative to unilaterally establish a Palestinian state.

Rather, Israel's main worry stems from the US administration's apparent failure to 'connect the dots' – that is, its failure to appreciate both the depth of the strategic dangers in the region as a whole, and the implications of these dangers for the peace process. To begin with, the Iranian threat was only a very minor element of the speech. Yet Iran and its allies pose a major strategic threat to Israel, to core American interests and, indeed, to any chance of peace. Moreover, the media's focus on the purely territorial dimension of Netanyahu's rejection of the 1967 borders misses the point. After all, the 2004 Bush letter to Sharon, which Netanyahu very much wanted Obama to endorse, also spoke about a peace agreement based on the 1949 armistice lines (a pseudonym for the 1967 borders).

What Netanyahu emphasized was that the 1967 borders, defined in a standalone way, are indefensible. He asserted instead Israel's right to defensible borders, specifically the long-term, interim presence of the IDF along the Jordan River. This would prevent both the smuggling of heavy weapons and missiles into the West Bank and the possibility of amassing the Arab states'

armies there, which could, in a worst-case scenario, threaten Israel's existence. This position is based on the conception that the West Bank's geo-strategic significance to Israel relates not only to Palestinian intentions and capabilities, but also to the wider regional situation. This strategic outlook is not Netanyahu's alone, rather it aligns with the historic position associated with Yitzhak Rabin and endorsed by Ehud Barak, who agreed to the most generous formal offer made to the Palestinians by the US – the Clinton Parameters of December 2000.

In contrast to the Israeli position, and despite the current regional turmoil, the Obama administration conceptualizes Israeli security vis-à-vis the West Bank in terms of the Palestinians alone. Obama's speech was good in that it referred to Israel's right to defend itself and made any Israeli military withdrawal phased and dependent on the actual performance of the Palestinians, rather than being based simply on a timetable. However, by making a complete military withdrawal dependent on only the Palestinian situation, and not the wider Middle East environment, Obama's vision poses a serious danger to Israel's security, especially in the uncertain and deeply problematic regional environment we see before us right now.

For Netanyahu, it would then seem, an Israeli withdrawal from the Jordan River would only be possible once the regional situation in the Middle East comes to resemble that of Obama's metaphor – Europe post-1989.

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