

# COMMENTARY

No.144

Monday, 2 September 2013

## **The Absence of Strategic Vision**

**Alon Ben-Meir**

**New York University**

The question often raised by many is, does the Obama administration have a cohesive strategy toward the Middle East that addresses the developments of events in the context of that strategy? The overwhelming response to this question by top officials, the academic community and ordinary people in the region is that the Obama administration simply reacts to various critical developments and has no strategic vision.

The US' reaction is often seen as too timid, stumbling through from one crisis to another, while losing both credibility and influence.

Many examples typify Obama's hesitant approach to these events that may well define the US' future role in the region as well as its capacity to shape or, at a minimum, influence events as they evolve to serve America's and its allies' national interests.

The civil war in Syria is certainly spinning out of control, especially following the use of chemical weapons for the second time by the government, which may well lead to the disintegration of Syria (if it hasn't already) unless decisive and purposeful measures are taken by the US immediately.

President Obama warned the Syrian government that the use of chemical weapons would cross a "red line" that would prompt a punitive American reaction.

The so-called red line has been crossed twice, yet it took the White House several months to assess the first use of such weapons when it was already ascertained that the Assad government was behind it.

Only after the use of such weapons for the second time (which have killed more than a thousand civilians) did the White House finally admit that the Assad government is the culprit.

The clock is ticking on Iran's race to develop a nuclear weapons program. Many observers believe that Obama's repeated assertion that all options (including military) are on the table to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons bears little credibility, and his reaction to the developments of regional events confirm that.

Many believe that once Iran musters the technology to produce nuclear weapons in short order, the President will settle for containment, which is a cause of major concern for Israel and the Gulf States.

President Obama has done little to inhibit Iran from its unwavering commitment to save Assad's regime by providing military and economic assistance. Moreover, the US failed to pressure Iraq to end Iranian over-flight loaded with weapons and munitions to Syria.

Should Assad succeed (thanks to the ineptitude of the West) in quelling the rebelliousness, Iran will achieve a second stunning victory, surpassing the handing over of Iraq to Iran on a golden platter in the wake of the Iraq war, which bears major regional repercussions.

The President has taken no action to prevent Hezbollah from joining the battle in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime and has ignored its dire repercussions on Lebanon, which has now been drawn into the Syrian civil war.

Syria and Iraq have become the battleground between the Sunnis and the Shiites, aided by Jihadists from both sects who are flocking in from several Arab and Muslim countries and adding fuel to the fire which will burn in the region for decades to come.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems manageable, though absent real progress in peace negotiations, which require intense American pressure on both sides, the negotiations could unravel and push the Palestinians to rise in an effort to end the Israeli occupation.

Finally, in its push for democracy, there is a clear disconnect between what the US would like to see and what the realities on the ground in many Arab states dictate. Even worse, the US turns a blind eye on gross human rights violations in other autocratic Arab states because of special strategic interests.

In sum, Obama has no cohesive strategy that effectively addresses multiple conflicts that impact on each other, producing a picture of timidity and aloofness.

Maybe I am off in my assessment of President Obama's foreign policy conduct; I am not wrong, however, about the perception that the President has created in and outside the region, and perception matters, especially in the Middle East, as much as reality does, if not more.

The perception of weakness, timidity, inaction and a lack of strategic vision by the Obama administration could lead to three troubling consequences:

First, the continuing alliances with the US could become ones of necessity that could be abandoned should the regional power equation change and a more reliable partner is found.

Russia, although criticized for allowing the slaughter of civilians to continue unabated, is also admired for its unwavering support of its ally, Assad.

Egypt's alliance with the Soviet Union, for example, from the early 1950s to the early 1970s was an alliance of necessity which was forsaken once the late Egyptian President Sadat concluded that Egypt's fortunes lay with the US.

Second, countries that depend on the US for security, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and others, and countries that fear the US, such as Iran, Syria or even Iraq, could be emboldened to act unilaterally on matters they deem necessary to safeguard their national interests.

Third, other powers such as Russia could continue to defy the US, knowing full well that President Obama's extraordinary cautious approach leaves wide openings for Moscow to act and fill the vacuum of leadership with near impunity.

As a result, the US continues to lose both credibility and influence and thereby is effectively ceding power to other regional or global players.

Having inherited two wars and an economy on the verge of depression, Obama's reluctance to engage the US in another armed conflict in the region is understandable.

However, since America remains the world's major power with global national security and economic interests, it cannot afford paralysis. It must restore its credibility to enable it to play its still indispensable role in the Middle East and beyond.

The US needs a long-term strategy toward the Arab world, not built around convenient and useful talking points, election cycles or even looming energy crises, but one that deals with the urgent needs of the hour in the context of its long-term strategic vision, starting with Syria's disastrous civil war.

To bring a swift end to the carnage in Syria and send a loud and clear message to Iran, Hezbollah, Islamic militants, North Korea and even Russia that the US' tolerance has its limit, President Obama must act now without any further delays.

The President must immediately assemble a coalition composed of major Western powers which may include England and France, along with some key Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, with the support of the Arab League to lend legitimacy outside the United Nations Security Council to take joint military actions against Assad's forces.

The military campaign should not be open-ended but limited in scope and without boots on the ground designed to cripple Assad's forces. The military assault should target Syria's air defence system, munitions depots, chemical stockpiles and all military runways to prevent combat aircrafts from taking off.

Most observers do not expect that Syria or any of its allies would retaliate against the US or any of its allies, fearing counter strikes of far greater magnitude.

In addition, the President should immediately authorize the shipment of anti-aircraft and anti-tank rockets and munitions, especially to the Free Syrian Army, to finish the job by disabling much of Assad's infantry.

America's standing and what is left of its credibility in the eyes of the international community is on the line. The burden falls squarely on President Obama's shoulders to act to save lives rather than preach the gospel of human rights, as there is no time left to spare.

**Note:** This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/the-absence-of-strategic-vision/>

**Dr. Alon Ben-Meir is a professor of international relations and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. He is also a journalist/author and writes a weekly syndicated column for United Press International, which appears regularly in US and international newspapers. Email: [alon@alonben-meir.com](mailto:alon@alonben-meir.com)**

---

**As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, **MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy****