

President Obama's Middle East Policy, 2009-2013

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ABSTRACT *President Barack Obama won the 2008 US presidential race with promises to restore America's lost image and status in the world, to lead the world again to achieve peace and dignity, and to start a "new beginning" with Muslims worldwide. This article examines Obama's promised "new beginning" with Muslims in the Middle East and assesses his Middle East policy to determine whether his policy marks a break from the previous George W. Bush administration's Mideast policy. First, it presents a comparative discussion on Bush's and Obama's Mideast policies and then turns to analyze a series of important issues that critically affects US-Mideast relations. It concludes that in the last five years (2009-2013) President Obama has, at best, achieved a mixed record –in some cases his approach has produced positive outcomes, in other cases, his policy is more a continuation of George W. Bush's policy.*

Barack Obama's election, as the 44th president of the United States (US) in December 2008, created a high degree of optimism for a new beginning for Americans and worldwide. His ascendance to power was marked by two watershed developments for America: first, the political decline of the neoconservatives, whom under former President George W. Bush entangled America in a series of endless "war on terrorism" operations abroad and, second, the promise that the new president would regain America's lost image and credibility in the international arena. In his inaugural address of January 20th, 2009 Obama enthusiastically spoke of America's role as a world leader again. He said: "And so, to all other peoples and governments watching us today...know that America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and we are ready to lead once more."¹ The desire to "lead once more" was predicated on a supposed transformation of American foreign policy by shedding the excesses of his predecessor's militaristic foreign policy characterized by the so-called "war on terror," the elimination of hostile regimes through preemptive strikes, the glorification of American military, and high defense spending.² The Middle East,

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the battleground of Bush's foreign policy, naturally captured the spotlight in Obama's stated transformational foreign policy. In the course of delivering the 2009 inaugural address, the new president promised to withdraw American troops from Iraq, firmly deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan, and reduce or eliminate nuclear threats in cooperation with "old friends and former foes."

More importantly, he called upon the Muslim world to join "a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect." In a similar landmark speech he made in June 2009 at Cairo University in Egypt, President Obama also offered hope for "a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world"³ and he sounded committed to his words.

This article focuses on President Obama's stated foreign policy "transformation" with regard to the Middle East region and presents an assessment of his Middle East policy from 2009 to 2013, the first five years of his presidency. It raises questions about Obama's policy of a "new beginning" in the Middle East and examines whether it marks a fundamental shift from Bush's Middle East policy. It concludes that the Obama administration's Middle East policy is more characterized by *continuity in change* and, other than the withdrawal from Iraq by the end of 2011 and the interim nuclear deal struck with Iran in November 2013, which are significant foreign policy developments judged by any criteria, Obama's Middle East policy falls short of making a fundamental break from the George W. Bush period. Further, certain US positions on perennial issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the animus towards Iran continue almost unchanged, while its position on the civil war in Syria appears to go nowhere. The article starts with a comparative discussion of Bush's and Obama's foreign policy approaches towards the Middle East and then relates the discussion, with an exclusive focus on Obama's policy, to a set of critical Middle Eastern issues –the Iraq war under the rubric of "war on terrorism," the stalemated Arab-Israeli peace process, and the Iranian-Western nuclear conflict. It also brings into focus the Obama administration's role in the Arab popular uprisings for democratic change and the associated use of force under the "responsibility to protect" doctrine to promote democracy in the Arab world.

US Middle East Policy: Bush and Obama in Perspectives

President George W. Bush took over the White House in January 2001 with no significant foreign policy commitments or priorities but was surrounded by a

group of close associates who were better known as neoconservatives (henceforth neocons). He started his presidency with an inward-looking domestic policy focused on issues like tax cuts, educational reforms, the “No Child Left behind Act”, etc. One important foreign policy issue he took serious interest in was the ballistic missile defense program.⁴ However, the major change in his foreign policy came after the notorious 9/11 attacks that not only changed America but the whole world forever. A new foreign policy was immediately announced as dividing the world along “friends versus foes lines”, with unforeseen implications for the post-war world order.⁵ The neocons used the attacks to justify efforts to promote America’s global supremacy and to reorder other societies along American ideological and political lines, particularly societies in the Middle East. Salient to US foreign policy towards the Middle East, this new ideology eventually drew up a dividing line between the Muslim world and the US. The attacks soon resulted in a new foreign policy prescription, which President Bush dubbed “the war on terrorism”, initially directed against the al-Qaeda network based in Afghanistan and subsequently extended to Iraq. Bush interpreted the 9/11 attacks as an existential threat posed by the Islamic fundamentalist group al-Qaeda, viewed it as a fight between good and evil forces, and declared his intention to rid the world of these evil forces.⁶ The “war on terrorism” was planned to be fought overseas and would target all organizations and states that supported al-Qaeda terrorists. In his address to the American people delivered on September 11th, 2001 Bush categorically said: “We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them”.⁷ This is what soon came to be known as the “Bush Doctrine”.⁸

Major strategic objectives, operational targets and plans of the Bush Doctrine were laid out in the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, issued in September 2002. It defined threats to freedom as primarily coming from non-state actors through a combination of “radicalism and technology,” which was a marked departure from the traditional idea of security defined as immunity to external military threats. The *National Security Strategy* identified three sources of threat agents: terrorist groups with no specific people or state to defend but are able to strike any country anywhere, states that provide refuge to terrorists, and rogue states that kill their own peoples and try to acquire weapons of mass destructions (WMD) to hold other states hostages. The reference to rogue states indicated a possible expansion of the frontier of the war on terror to include states hostile to America. In his 2002 State of the Union address, Bush referred to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as members of “an axis of evil”, hostile states that collaborated with terrorists and were posing serious threats to American security and prosperity.⁹

Bush’s war on terror officially started on October 7th, 2001 with large-scale military assaults on Afghanistan to eliminate al-Qaeda and its protector -the Taliban government. Having the Taliban and al-Qaeda forces driven out of

US President Barack Obama and former president George W. Bush arrive on stage for the George W. Bush Presidential Center (The Bush Library) dedication ceremony in Dallas, Texas.

AFP PHOTO / JEWEL SAMAD

Kabul, President Bush directed efforts to include Iraq in his campaign against global terrorism on the grounds that the late Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein had possessed WMD that threatened America and that he maintained close links to terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda.¹⁰ He defied global opposition, bypassed the UN Security Council, and unilaterally decided to invade Iraq on March 3rd, 2003 with the support of the so-called “coalition of the willing” but ultimately ended up with

no WMD found in Iraq. The Iraq Survey Group, appointed by the Bush administration itself to seek biological and chemical weapons, finally concluded that US WMD intelligence on Iraq was wrong. Moreover, no link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda was ever proven. Bush’s second term in office started in January 2005 and this time he exclusively shifted his attention away from WMD to democracy promotion in Iraq, an elusive goal that he never achieved. Initially, his administration used the rhetorical slogans of freedom and liberty for the Iraqi people in the run up to the invasion in 2003 but once the allegations of WMD and links to al-Qaeda proved false, democracy promotion became his only option to justify the invasion and occupation of Iraq. But rising sectarian violence between Shi’ites and Sunnis, unbridgeable differences between Iraqi political parties and groups, differing opinions on US troop presence on Iraqi soil, and so on, had critically defeated Bush’s democracy promotion agenda in Iraq. The Bush administration, before the invasion, appeared not to have realized that controlling and rebuilding a country like Iraq would be much more difficult than toppling the Saddam regime. The rising human and material costs of the war and the Iraqi opposition to occupation quickly morphed into a deadly insurgency. This rapidly deteriorating situation blew away all hope for a post-Saddam democratic Iraq. Bush himself later described the Iraq war as “a catastrophic success”.¹¹

President Bush’s Middle East centric foreign policy, as a whole, was marked by three significant characteristics: first, unilateralism at the expense of multi-lateral efforts to deal with terrorism and other global issues; second, the promotion of democracy through force; and, third, militarism. Aggressive unilateralism became an important part of American foreign policy after the 9/11 attacks. The administration officials, particularly the neocons, had a deep dis-



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trust in international institutions and were in favor of shedding institutional constraints on America's freedom of actions in the global arena. It launched military attacks on Afghanistan with UN approval but bypassed the same institution with regard to Iraq, primarily due to French and Russian threats to veto American actions to topple the Saddam Hussein regime. The neocons projected the UN as a weak organization, unable to deal with global issues of anarchy and threats to global peace.¹² They cited the UN's inability to stop Serbian aggressions against the Bosnians or to save the Kosovars from the Serbs as reasons for avoiding the world body.¹³ The neocons found it logical to "go it alone" to promote their Iraq agenda, despite then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's warning that any US military actions against Iraq would be in violation of the UN Charter. But once the invasion of Iraq was over, the Bush administration showed some interests in limited multilateralism. It invited allies and adversaries to participate in Iraqi reconstruction efforts and to deal with Tehran's and Pyongyang's nuclear programs. The immediate reason behind this policy shift was dual, on the one hand the US needed multilateral help and cooperation to stabilize Iraq and, on the other, the US wanted to neutralize Iranian opposition to the occupation of Iraq.

Alongside unilateralism, President Bush emphasized democracy promotion as a means to promote global peace and ensure security at home. Democracy promotion was conceived as an effective weapon to fight back terrorism and win over autocracies and totalitarianisms. In his second inaugural address in January 2005, Bush emphasized that it was "the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world".¹⁴ Interestingly, Bush's democracy promotion project was premised on the use of force and Saddam Hussein's regime was its first "victim" in the post-cold war world. Different US governments in the past used force to topple monarchs and even elected officials in fourteen other countries, including Cuba, Chile, Iran, Panama and South Vietnam.¹⁵ Middle Eastern "Islamic radicalism", according to Bush, was averse to the American system of political rights and freedoms. Hence, there was the need for democracy promotion through force to dispel Islamic hatred towards the US. But this was a departure from the missions and visions of the founding fathers of America who had great contempt for regime change through force. Thomas Jefferson is known for his opposition to the French Convention of 1792 that openly proposed to assist peoples everywhere

in their struggles to promote liberty. He condemned the French to force liberty on other peoples.¹⁶ Bush's democracy promotion agenda soon scared China, and Russia, who viewed it as an attempt to create a global American empire. Among the regional states, Iran and Syria had much to fear; Damascus' and Tehran's hostile relations with Washington created a strong sense of insecurity, which largely forced the Iranians to rush to the nuclear option to deter possible American aggression after Iraq.¹⁷

Lastly, Bush and the neocons had a preference for a policy of militarism to preclude the possible emergence of new global competitors after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. They concluded that American military supremacy was a prerequisite for American global leadership. President Bush confirmed this at his West Point military academy speech in June 2002, where he said: "America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge –thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace."¹⁸ This was quite evident in his refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the decision to go ahead with the national missile defense program. This new militarism was clearly reflected in the Bush administration's preferences for military solutions to all problems viewed harmful to American interests abroad, including the fight against terrorism. Military spending went up sharply; in 2004 the US Congress allocated \$436 billion to fight terrorism, an increase of \$29 billion from the previous year. The war on terrorism cost the Bush administration a total of \$432 billion from September 2001 to June 2006, leading to budget deficits and a rise in national debt.¹⁹ Furthermore, the war on terror incurred such a huge cost the Bush administration could not possibly have imagined. The "Costs of War" study group, consisting of academics from Brown University and Boston University, reported in June 2011 that the total cost of the war on terrorism was around US \$5 trillion, a claim that sharply contradicted the Pentagon's position that the actual cost was limited to \$1 trillion.²⁰ At the core of Bush's policy of militarism lied the fear of perpetual military confrontation with rivals like China and Russia. And it no doubt undercut the already tenuous mutual trust and cooperation between America and those states. Beijing's and Moscow's opposition to US actions on Iran's nuclear program during the Bush period in the White House is a clear example of that.

In contrast to Bush's policies, Obama's Middle East policies sprang out of a new set of national and global realities. By the time President Obama took over the White House, a series of critical developments marked the US domestic domain and the global arena. Obama inherited a recession-hit shaken economy with financial institutions collapsing and millions of jobless and homeless Americans, ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the nuclear stalemate with Iran and North Korea, the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and the challenges posed by the new group of emerging economies, commonly called

BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). His worldview came to be shaped by realities in a globalized world,²¹ compared to Bush's worldview fostered by a belief in American supremacy and the preference for brute force to diplomacy. Obama saw globalization as a power diffusion process and singled out terrorism as one of the many problems spawned by a globalizing world. He came to the conclusion that military power has its limits in dealing with problems like terrorism that transcend national borders and that American security required cooperation with partners in multilateral forums. Diplomatic engagement, not the threat of force, could win more partners and friends for America. However, this change in foreign policy course did not necessarily produce more partners to support US foreign policy goals or global leadership under the Obama administration. Meanwhile, the emerging economies of Brazil, China, and India already gained enough momentum to impress the global economic order and to challenge America's leading role.²²



George Bush's failure to achieve American foreign policy objectives through the use of force obviously encouraged Obama to try a combination of soft and hard power approaches

Obama's foreign policy approach was more elaborately outlined in the new *National Security Strategy* (NSS) released in May 2010.²³ The new NSS looks at the world in the way it is rather than how it should look like. It recognizes the reality of an interdependent world and makes a series of conclusions with significant impacts for America and the world. For instance, the most important priorities for America are that the extended wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are unsustainable, the prevention of nuclear proliferation, and the minimization of the effects of climate change. The NSS also recognizes the need to increasingly engage with Russia, China, and India to deal with global problems. There was no mention of phrases like "Islamic extremism" or "Islamic terrorism," nor was there any reference to the Bush era concept of pre-emptive strikes against states or non-state actors posing threats to America, perceived or real. Still, the commitment to fight and destroy al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups and deny them any safe havens remained unshaken; it did not, however, totally discard the necessity to act unilaterally, if such actions were deemed necessary. It states: "The United States must reserve the right to act unilaterally if necessary to defend our nation and our interests, yet we will also seek to adhere to standards that govern the use of force."²⁴

The most dramatic shift the new NSS makes is the issue of the use of force to promote American interests –the shift is evident in Obama's preference for diplomacy over brute force. Nevertheless, resorting to force was still the chosen option in the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 when popular

uprisings against the late Libyan leader turned violent, a topic discussed at some length below. Obama's policies appeared to stand for a robust American leadership role in the world but preferred not to alienate friends and allies. The idea was to develop a clear foreign policy mission, which the US allies could support while still having a willingness to talk to opponents and foes without any preconditions.²⁵

Obama's foreign policy strategy has been dubbed by some analysts as the "smart power" strategy fitting in a new context.²⁶ His former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton referred to the concept of "smart power" strategy at her Senate confirmation hearing, where she defined it as a combination of political, economic, diplomatic, and other available tools to deal with emerging developments related to American foreign policy. She said: "We must use what has been called 'smart power,' the full range of tools at our disposal – diplomatic, economic,

military, political, legal, and cultural – picking the right tool, or combination of tools, for each situation."²⁷ Obama did not say much about the smart power approach, except making some indirect references in his 2009 Cairo speech where he said: "We also know that military power alone is not going to solve the problems in Afghanistan and Pakistan."

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In sum, it came to mean a shift from exclusive reliance on a military option to a combination of military and non-military options to tackle problems important to America and its interests.

Harvard Professor Joseph S. Nye²⁸ originally coined and defined the term "smart power" as "the ability to combine hard and soft power into a winning strategy." Nye's advice was that America should not solely depend on military power to pursue its foreign policy interests. George Bush's failure to achieve American foreign policy objectives through the use of force obviously encouraged Obama to try a combination of soft and hard power approaches. Still, this innovative "smart power" approach did not entirely originate with the Obama administration. Robert Gates, Bush's second term defense secretary, initiated the idea of applying soft power after his Senate confirmation in December 2006. Gates attempted to reformulate US national security after the neocons were brought down by the failure to rein in al-Qaeda and promote democracy and stability in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead of relying on military power alone, Gates advocated the use of civilian expertise to contribute to the realization of US national security objectives.²⁹ He moved forward with plans to promote studies in Muslim religious and cultural values and traditions, terrorist organizations, and their radical ideologies to better understand the Muslim

Middle East and devise better strategies to deal with it. Gates' soft power approach convinced Obama to keep him as part of the new administration but the President decided to further expand the approach to cover both defense and foreign policy areas.

The "smart power" approach did not sound very promising for the new administration given the difficult context in which Obama started his presidency. As mentioned before, he had among the most complex global challenges to resolve as an American president. And some of the challenges, such as fighting two wars simultaneously in Afghanistan and Iraq inherited from the Bush administration, Iran's and North Korea's defiant positions on the nuclear issue, the global recession, economic challenges posed by the BRICS countries, and the deadlock with the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations actually threatened to defeat Obama's "smart power" approach. Nonetheless, he used regional and international forums to spell out his foreign policy approach and promote the strategy to paint America's positive image and status worldwide. He adeptly addressed Muslims to make to launch a "new beginning" with them, called upon people around the world to be partners in peace and prosperity but, at the same time, moved ahead with a surge in troops in Afghanistan to change the course of the war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters. His embrace of "smart power" diplomacy apparently paid off, at least, initially: global public opinion about the US changed dramatically by the middle of 2009 and in many cases opinions were as positive as they were before the Bush period.³⁰ However, the Middle East was an exception; Muslims were not very moved by Obama's diplomatic charm offensive. That calls into question the effectiveness of Obama's "smart power"-based foreign policy strategy, which ultimately did little to resolve the Middle East's long and intractable problems.

Obama's "Smart Power" Approach in the Middle East

Generally, in the first five years from 2009-2013, the Obama administration dealt with traditional Middle Eastern conflicts as well as new developments spawned by the Arab Spring. However, America's involvement in those conflicts has shown little signs of progress towards resolution, similarly to the Bush administration. The main accomplishment Obama made was the US withdrawal from Iraq, and it could be argued the new opening towards Iran is a positive step forward, but for now there remains no permanent settlement on Iran's nuclear question. The Arab Spring, whose impact is still reverberating throughout the region, has posed extra challenges to the Obama administration's Middle East policy. In the following pages, the article maps out the various factors at play, the hard realities behind the scene, and roles of regional and extra-regional actors that have either facilitated or obstructed Obama's "smart power" approach to the Middle East.

End of the Iraq War

One of Obama's electoral pledges was to "get the US out of the war in Iraq". Soon after assuming power in January 2009, he ordered all American troops, combat and non-combat, to leave Iraq by December 2011, paving the way to effectively end the Iraq war. It was a difficult step, given the complex political dynamics inside Iraq and tough competitions for influence by neighboring countries in the post-US withdrawal Iraq. President Bush also decided to pull-out from Iraq but having left residual forces to train Iraqi armed forces and to keep al-Qaeda operatives under check.

Political dynamics in Iraq during the US occupation years (2003-2011) were shaped by two critical developments: Shiite-Sunni sectarian violence, and the rise of pro-Iran Shiite political elites. These two developments were the direct outcomes of the US occupation of Iraq. The sectarian violence started after 2006 and resulted in a massive bloodbath and casualties on both sides of the religious divide, with the lives of common Iraqis being torn apart.³¹ Iraq's two powerful neighbors, Shi'ite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, positioned themselves to support their sectarian co-religionists. Iran sought to realize at least three principal interests: first, the installation of a friendly Shi'ite government in Baghdad that would pose no Saddam-like threats to Iran in the future; second, the gradual US disengagement from Iraq; and third, the minimization of Sunni Arab influence in Iraq. Saudi Arabia's interests were the exact opposite; it wanted to thwart the Iranian-backed Shi'ite resurgence while supporting a secular government, inclusive of Shi'ites as well as Sunnis, in a post-occupation Iraqi political system. While Saudi Arabia courted the Sunni tribal leaders and secular Shi'ite political parties led by former interim prime minister Ayad Allawi, Iran strongly shored up groups and parties like the al-Sadr Movement and the Iraqi List Party led by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.³² The majority Shi'ites, who were repressed under late Saddam Hussein's long rule, were, however, expected to politically sweep away the minority Sunnis. That prompted Secretary Robert Gates to unsuccessfully persuade Saudi and Egyptian leaders to engage the Shi'ite political elites to avert sectarian violence, promote regional security stability, and thus check Iranian influence in Iraq.³³

Given widespread Iraqi-public opposition to occupation forces and despite a greater scope for Iranian influence in Iraq, the US had hardly any choice other than total withdrawal. The Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), the Bush administration signed with the Iraqi government in December 2008, required US forces to leave Iraq by January 1, 2012. Nouri al-Maliki's government was unwilling to negotiate another SOFA agreement, which would have allowed US troops to stay beyond that deadline. The Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's threats to withdraw from al-Maliki's ruling coalition and thus bring down his government finally put the American troops on the road towards the exit from Iraq. Like Bush, Obama had liked to see a small number of US troops stationed

in Iraq to meet contingencies but the Iraqis refused to grant them immunity to local laws;³⁴ the implication was that American troops must operate within the framework of Iraqi laws and would remain accountable to the Iraqi legal system for all military operations.

US withdrawal from Iraq fit with Obama's position on the Iraq war from the beginning and his electoral campaign promises. He denounced the Iraq war, as Bush's "dumb war", back in early October 2002, a position he strongly reiterated during the 2007-2008 presidential campaign.³⁵ He criticized Bush for not ending the Iraq war and was worried about "a US occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences" but stood firm to "finish the fight with bin Laden and al-Qaeda" in Afghanistan,³⁶ a partial continuation of Bush's policy. The war on terror kept on rolling.

The Stalled Israel-Palestine Peace Process

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a daunting challenge for President Obama as well as a test case of his "smart power" approach. He, in fact, hoped to succeed in bringing this conflict to an end while his predecessors had either failed or lacked the resolve to deal with it. President Bush was more preoccupied with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, thus, the peace between Israel and Palestine was not on his list of foreign policy priorities. Yet, in 2003 the Bush administration pushed the peace agenda through the Quartet (composed of the US, the EU, Russia, and the UN) by proposing a two-state solution to the conflict. Known as the "roadmap," the proposal initially called on the Israelis and the Palestinians to reach a peace agreement by 2005, whereby they would implement the two-state solution and co-exist in a peaceful and secure environment. Major contentious issues like the status of Jerusalem and the return of the Palestinian refugees to their land were to be resolved on a mutually acceptable basis. The "roadmap", however, was largely derailed due to a series of developments, such as Israel's entrenched position not to compromise its defense and security by withdrawing from Palestinian lands, particularly its refusal to stop settlement expansions; the 2006 electoral victory of Hamas, which has refused to accept the existence of Israel; and Hamas' takeover of Gaza in 2007 that effectively divided Palestine into two separate entities.

Obama's diplomatic foray to resolve the conflict started from where Bush's efforts had stopped. In keeping with his "smart power" approach, and with a focus on the two-state solution, Obama demanded in May 2009 that Israel must freeze all settlement constructions to give peace negotiations a chance³⁷ but was forced to drop this demand by late 2010, after the Israelis had declined



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to stop settlement construction.³⁸ The US reverted to the old strategy of political and diplomatic influence, similar to the Bush administration, to engage the Israelis and the Palestinians in the peace process. George Mitchell, who Obama appointed as his Mideast peace envoy in January 2009, failed to make any progress in the negotiation process and resigned in early May 2011. Two new developments further undermined the Obama administration's Mideast peace efforts. First, as of December 2010, the Arab pro-democracy uprisings that started in Tunisia swiftly engulfed Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Second, the Palestinian Authority's launched diplomatic efforts to obtain UN recognition

of a Palestinian state in 2011. Washington and Tel Aviv were scared by the move to take the Palestinian statehood issue to the UN General Assembly and thus avoid the Security Council where the US could use its veto, as it had done repeatedly in the past. The General Assembly recognized Palestine as a "non-member state" on November 30th, 2012 with a vote of 138-9.³⁹ This represented an important political win for the Palestinian people and a major diplomatic blow to the US and Israel. Prime Minister Netanyahu, after his January 2013 electoral victory, focused more on the Iranian nuclear issue and simultaneously expanded settlement activities. The peace process completely stalled, as a result, and Obama's "smart power" approach suffered its first major blow.

In a bid to revive the peace process, Obama, during his March 2013 visit to Israel, underlined his government's commitment to Mideast peace and he again emphasized the Quartet-proposed two-state solution,⁴⁰ which Bush attempted but failed. His Secretary of State John Kerry successfully persuaded the Israelis and the Palestinians to restart direct peace negotiations as of late July 2013. This time both sides decided not to attach any preconditions to peace negotiations. As before, Hamas remained opposed to negotiations with Israel, and Mr. Netanyahu had never felt the need to halt settlement expansions to support peace with the Palestinians. Kerry-mediated direct peace talks finally collapsed by the end of April 2014. Obama's "smart power" approach, like all previous peace initiatives, did not turn the page in Mideast peace negotiations. There was no change, on the contrary Obama's foreign policy on the Israel-Palestine issue fits into the continuity of a stalled peace process.

The Iran Nuclear Conflict

Obama's Iran policy has been marked by toughness as well as a desire to break out of the nuclear standoff with Tehran. Although after winning the race to the White House in 2009, he called on Iran to "unclench its fist," his administration has, in fact, inflicted more crippling sanctions on Iran than the Bush adminis-



U.S. Army soldiers salute after walking off the plane as they arrive at their home after being part of one of the last American combat units to exit from Iraq in December 2011.

GETTY IMAGES / JOE RAEDLE

tration on the suspicions that Iranian nuclear program was secretly developing the bomb and that Iran failed to comply with different UN resolution requiring it to halt its nuclear program. The latest sanctions targeting Iran's oil industry and banks were imposed by the US and the European Union on eve of 2012.⁴¹ Whereas Bush adopted a hard power approach to counter Iran's nuclear program, including the threat of use of force to substantially damage, if not totally wipe out, Iranian nuclear sites and infrastructures, Obama's approach has been more a carrot and stick policy to induce Iran to negotiate. But the Iranians have hardly cowed even in the face of the harshest sanctions. Under former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Tehran pursued a policy of confrontation with the West, defied US and Israeli threats of military strikes, and participated in a few rounds of nuclear negotiations but resisted all pressures to abandon the nuclear program.⁴² During his first term in office, President Obama appeared less resolved to put an end to the nuclear dispute with Iran. Being susceptible to pressures by the pro-Israel lobby and hawkish Congressmen at Capitol Hill, he lacked the political will to give nuclear diplomacy with Iran a serious try. Both Tehran and Washington took part in nuclear negotiations while hoping that nothing concrete would come out of negotiations.⁴³

The Iranian June 2013 presidential election brought about unexpected changes in the conservatives and hardliners-dominated Iranian power structure. Hassan Rouhani, a political moderate and reformer, won the election with a comfortable majority, which soon changed the strategic calculations in Washington. President Rouhani prioritized his foreign policy on the normalization of relations with the West and lifting the Iranian economy out of devastating sanctions.⁴⁴ This fit perfectly with President Obama's new foreign policy priority

of gradual disengagement from the Middle East and more involvement in Asia to face off a rising China. Influenced by Thomas Donilon, the National Security adviser from October 2010 to early June 2013, he decided to go for a low-profile policy towards the Middle East and a high-profile policy approach in East Asia,⁴⁵ in part prompting the need for a “smart power” approach to Iran. In line with this policy priority, he was quick to seize the opportunity to resolve the nuclear issue with Iran. In his 2013 UN General Assembly speech, Obama welcomed Rouhani’s statement that Iran would not go after the bomb and he directed John Kerry to join the European Union to step up diplomacy to negotiate a deal with Tehran.⁴⁶ Obama’s and Rouhani’s efforts finally succeeded in clinching an interim nuclear deal on November 24, 2013 that was expected to pave the way for a permanent deal in the next six months, though it ultimately failed to materialize.

The interim deal was not, however, without pitfalls. It required Iran to halt its nuclear activities for the next six months in exchange for some sanctions relief. Tehran, however, retained the right to uranium enrichment up to a 5% level. Although many Iranians and Americans have warmly welcomed the deal, the hardliners in Tehran and the hawks in Washington have voiced their serious concerns. The Iranian hardliners, the religious conservatives and the Revolutionary Guards, have interpreted it as surrender to the West, the hawkish Senators and members of the House of Representatives in Washington saw it as a major security concern for Israel.⁴⁷ Israel and Washington’s Gulf Arab allies opposed the deal, as it recognized Iranian supremacy in the Middle East region, which, in turn, undermined their own security and regional status.⁴⁸ The Iranian hardliners are so far kept at bay due to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s support for the deal. President Obama is, however, facing a difficult situation to persuade the pro-Israel hawkish Senators who view any deal with Iran as a bad deal, negotiated at the expense of Israeli interests. The signing of the interim deal, however, marked a milestone in Obama’s “smart power” approach. It demonstrates his administration’s willingness to directly negotiate with Iran, a country President Bush included in his infamous “axis of evil” and refused to negotiate with during his Presidency. Thus, under Obama’s administration, there has been a shift from Bush’s military option to a combination of political and diplomatic tools to iron out differences with Iran on the nuclear issue.

Obama and the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring caught the Obama administration off-guard. This was a major historical development in the Middle East and North Africa where the US played a reactive, not a proactive role. Youth groups that spearheaded the pro-democracy movements had no ties to Washington. Obama candidly admitted this after the fall of Zine al-Abidin Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak when he declared: “It’s not America that put people into the streets of Tunis and Cairo.”⁴⁹ Hillary Clinton made a similar statement: “These revolutions are not ours. They are not by us, for us, or against us.”⁵⁰ Clearly then, the Obama administration had no

strategic vision of how to respond to the pro-democracy movements. It was rather hesitant to aid the democratic forces and facilitate a transition from dictatorship to democracy for two main reasons. First off, the administration was uncertain that the new Arab democracies, like their autocratic counterparts, would maintain friendly ties to the US and Israel. Hamas' electoral victory in 2006 did not bring it closer to the US or West European democracies. Secondly, Washington's nemesis, Iran, was enthusiastic in its support for the pro-democracy forces, until the outbreak of anti-government protest movements in Syria. The Iranian leaders falsely assumed that the movements were driven by an "Islamic awakening", like their own 1979 Islamic Revolution, to overthrow US-protected authoritarian rulers in the region and thus kick out the Western powers.⁵¹ The Iranian bid for influence, which succeeded in ending post-1979 diplomatic isolation with Cairo under the erstwhile Mohammed Morsi government, complicated US reactions to the Arab Spring forces. Smart power did not, or had a limited scope in influencing the pro-democracy movements; rather, realpolitik appeared to determine the course of US policy choices.

US policy response to Libya and Syria, two other Arab states swept away by pro-democracy movements, saw a return to Bush's preference for military options to promote democracy in the Arab world

Overall, the Obama administration's response to the Arab Spring was marked by two main characteristics: one, tensions between pro-democracy versus pro-autocracy policy preferences; and two, a cautious approach to use force to promote democracy in the Arab world. These two aspects combined represented a real dilemma for Obama. On the one hand, during his 2009 inaugural address, he advanced his ideals to support democracy and peace for everyone everywhere, but on the other hand, the imperatives of protecting America's geopolitical interests in the Middle East and North Africa appeared strong. When Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation on December 17, 2010 sparked a nation-wide protest movement in Tunisia that buried Ben Ali's long dictatorial rule, Obama was quick to support the Tunisian pro-democracy movement. In his 2011 State of the Union address he said: "[T]he United States of America stands with the people of Tunisia, and supports the democratic aspirations of all people",⁵² but made no mention of Egypt where a similar anti-Mubarak protest movement broke out on the same day he made the speech. The administration dithered on the Egypt question and even tried to protect Mubarak. On January 30, 2011 Hillary Clinton declared that the president supported an "orderly transition" in Egypt under Mubarak, a massive blow to the pro-democracy protesters, who gathered at Tahrir Square. Seeing the mass resilience to oust Mubarak, Obama finally disassociated the US from the Mubarak regime on February 1, 2011 by declaring: "An orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it

Obama's "smart power" approach has not paid off everywhere in the Middle East, particularly in the case of the Israel-Palestine peace process

and repressions of pro-democracy forces in Bahrain, home to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, Washington maintained its silence, failed to condemn the Bahraini government's violence against peaceful protesters, and even acquiesced to Saudi military intervention to protect the authoritarian al-Khalifa rulers.⁵⁴ In Yemen, the Obama administration initially threw its weight behind Ali Abdullah Saleh, a long-time president and a key US ally in the fight against al-Qaeda terrorism in the Arabian Peninsula, and then backed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) brokered agreement to stop further violence and instability in Yemen.⁵⁵

US policy response to Libya and Syria, two other Arab states swept away by pro-democracy movements, saw a return to Bush's preference for military options to promote democracy in the Arab world. After initial reluctance, Obama finally decided to go for the force option to promote democracy in Libya, though eventually he opted not to apply force to topple the Al-Assad government in Syria. The difference is that whereas Bush openly talked of military power to advance his freedom and democracy promotion agenda, Obama resorted to force under the ruse of humanitarian mission to protect the Libyans from Gaddafi's atrocities. UN Security Council Resolution 1973 that legitimized NATO-led military intervention to dislodge the Gaddafi government was approved on March 17, 2011. Before going to the Security Council, the US brought the Arab League to the fore to show the world that it was the Arab League, not the US that wanted military actions in Libya. Additionally, Secretary Clinton obtained from the Russians a vote of abstention, since they were threatening to block any actions including a no-fly zone against the Gaddafi government.⁵⁶ This was a clever diplomatic ploy; the Obama administration preferred the use of force to topple Gaddafi but did not present it to the American public as a US-led initiative, instead it engaged indirectly under the umbrella of an international coalition. One Obama adviser has characterized US actions in Libya as "leading from behind."⁵⁷ This was a good diplomatic technique for Obama to get other nations to do America's bidding to take on governments unfriendly or hostile to America's interests.

The same strategy of "leading from behind" did not, however, work in the case of Syria where both government troops and the opposition rebel fighters are committing violent crimes against humanity.⁵⁸ Syria's great power backers, Russia and China, defeated two Security Council resolutions to initiate actions

must begin now."⁵³ It soon drew fire from Israel and Saudi Arabia who doubted Washington's commitment to save old friends.

Still, the old policy of supporting dictators in Bahrain and Yemen managed to hold on. Despite killings

against the Assad government, which also enjoys ironclad support from its regional partners Iran and the Lebanon-based group Hezbollah. On Syria, the Obama administration preferred to avoid the risk of getting Russia and Iran involved in a new military confrontation in the Middle East, which the American public, after a serious military debacle in Iraq, would not easily stomach.

Conclusion

Obama's Middle East policy is still evolving; in the last five years it did not develop a fixed or predictable policy framework to deal with Middle East issues. Initially, Obama's Middle East policy was driven by an idealistic premise to correct relations with the Muslims after George W. Bush had led the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and their devastating fall-out. However, rapidly, Obama had to face the stark realities and unexpected challenges in the Middle East and reassess his foreign policy approach. In the corner of potential successes of Obama's policy are the US withdrawal from Iraq, a new window of opening to Iran, and an initial shift from the policy of regime change, which his predecessor George Bush promoted and pursued as a foreign policy priority, to direct negotiations with foes. The Obama administration preferred to sign the interim nuclear deal with Iran with the expectation of hammering out a long-term solution to the nuclear dispute. A lasting Iran-US nuclear deal, if that finally happens, would be a milestone in Obama's "smart power" approach. The withdrawal from Iraq and the change in position towards Iran are very distinct policies compared to those led by President Bush. However, the real underlying difference comes from a shift from hard power diplomacy to a combination of hard and soft power diplomacy.

Obama's "smart power" approach has not paid off everywhere in the Middle East, particularly in the case of the Israel-Palestine peace process. The Clinton and Bush administrations undertook initiatives to resolve this conflict towards the end of their respective presidencies; Obama stepped up actions early in his first term in office but failed to get Israeli leaders onboard. Secretary John Kerry's post-July 2013 efforts did not yield any positive results. Many Palestinians, victims of this entrenched conflict, see the US as "brokers of deceit" and they believe that the US acts "increasingly in defense of Israel's interests and to the systematic detriment of those of the Palestinians" while using "high-sounding but dishonest language".⁵⁹ An honest broker or not, the basic problem with the US Mideast policy is its general tendency to align itself with Israel, and perceive itself as a power integral to the region. Fawaz Gerges writes: "Instead of viewing the region from the inside out, American officials looked at it from the outside in, from a globalist perspective".⁶⁰ The Obama administration has not departed from this longstanding American position, even if it has attempted to look beyond the regional status quo by hesitantly supporting the political

demise of Hosni Mubarak and bringing down the Gaddafi government in Libya through the use of force. The Libyan case represents a continuation of the Bush administration's policy preference to use force in the Middle East. Syria, however, remains an exception, due to a set of different regional and international calculations. The use of force option in Syria did not fit with Obama's "smart power" strategy. Overall, Obama's Middle East policy approach reflects *continuity in change*, not a fundamental break from George W. Bush's policy towards the region. ■

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