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## Report

# In the Great Middle East, Obama Has Achieved Very Little

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U.S. power in the world is undisputably eroding but not declining. The difference between erosion and decline is significant: a declining power is a power that is operationally incapable of structuring the international order and has virtually no chance of regaining its former position while an eroding power is a power whose relative influence has decreased but remains active and capable of shaping events. Multipolarity erodes U.S. supremacy because other actors are entering the global competition. Simultaneously, however, multipolarity creates huge opportunities for U.S. power because a region like Asia, for example, which benefits from the reallocation of power is by no means politically unified. The discrepancy between economic prosperity and strategic fragmentation in Asia has been comprehended by the Obama administration quite well. For example the rise of China, causes ASEAN countries to rely more on U.S. strategic pledges than in the past. A country like India sees in the development of its relationship with Washington an opportunity to softly balance China. U.S. power needs to rely on other actors to solve security issues because it is incapable of solving them alone but none of those problems can be solved without its approval. How does this pattern apply to the Middle East?

When he assumed presidency, Obama had five main objectives in this Middle East: rekindling U.S.-Arab relations severely damaged by the war in Iraq, achieving a major breakthrough in the Middle East peace process by pushing Benjamin Netanyahu to halt settlements, establishing stability in Iraq before leaving it, withdrawing from Afghanistan from a position of strength and on the basis of minimal political convergence with Pakistan, and initiating dialogue with Tehran on the future of its nuclear program.

Obama's Cairo speech led to very high expectations in the Muslim world when he stated that the U.S.-Islamic misunderstanding will be overcome only by settling the Israel-Palestine conflict. It did not get into the details of a negotiated settlement, but it expressed America's desire to be involved in one. It also established real symmetry in the obligations of the two parties (the Israelis and Palestinians) with renewed emphasis on illegal settlements and the need for Israel to end them. A detailed analysis of the speech shows that Obama was interrupted by public applause thirty-seven times. The distribution of the applause is indicative of the audience's receptivity to the themes he developed. Of the thirty seven interruptions, fourteen occurred in the part that was largely devoted to relations between Islam and the West, six during his discussion of the Palestinian issue, four when he invoked democracy, and three when he talked about women. In contrast, his references to the need for religious freedom were only applauded once, and his mention of Iran's nuclear issue did not elicit any applause. This indicates that an attack against Iran will be a hard sell in the Arab world in spite of the deep political distrust between the Arab world and Iran. Unfortunately, the political commitment was not followed by concrete steps.

However, Obama retreated very quickly in face of Israeli intransigence and limited his ambitions. It is interesting to closely examine the evolution of U.S. policy on this subject through Obama's statements at the United Nations in 2009, 2010, and 2011. From year to year, U.S. ambitions fell while support for Israel's positions grew. In 2009, Obama expressed strong personal desire to be involved in the settlement of the conflict, stating that he "will also continue to seek a just and lasting peace between Israel, Palestine, and the Arab world." He also emphasized the importance of the international community's support for bilateral negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians when he declared, "In pursuit of that goal, we will develop regional initiatives with multilateral participation, alongside bilateral negotiations." Finally, he systematically treated Israeli and Palestinian grievances equally.

In 2010, when he addressed the United Nations for the second time, two significant changes were apparent. The first concerned the role of the international community, which was hardly mentioned: "Now, peace must be made by Israelis and Palestinians, but each of us has a responsibility to do our part as well."

The second and more significant change concerned the consideration of both parties' perspectives. While the grievances of both camps were placed on an equal footing in 2009, the balance was disrupted in 2010. Obama only mentioned the Palestinian

perspective briefly though he expanded on the Israeli perspective. The September 2011 speech reflected a new low in U.S. ambition despite the 17th May 2011 statement in which he attempted to express a more determined position in the wake of the Arab spring. He now only insisted on one key point: the two parties needed to reach an agreement between themselves and not expect too much of the international community.

Declaring at UN headquarters that that UN resolutions are of little help in settling the problem was quite unprecedented, especially from a U.S. President who claims to embrace more multilateralism. Obama justified his new position with historic examples: "Peace depends upon compromise among people who must live together long after our speeches are over, long after our votes have been tallied. That's the lesson of Northern Ireland, where ancient antagonists bridged their differences. That's the lesson of Sudan, where a negotiated settlement led to an independent state. And that is and will be the path to a Palestinian state—negotiations between the parties." To believe that a conflict can only be resolved if the parties have the willingness to do so seems like common sense. However, this is a questionable proposition. First, Obama's examples of Northern Ireland and Sudan are hardly convincing because they happen to be conflicts in which the United States was highly involved. In fact, George Mitchell, the U.S. negotiator in Ireland, symbolically became the special envoy for peace in the Middle East in the first years of the Obama administration, before he eventually resigned. In Sudan, U.S. involvement is such that South Sudan clearly would never have existed without the support of the United States. Even this is a questionable interpretation of the Middle East. The 1978 Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel were only made possible by President Carter's strong commitment given how far apart their positions were despite President Sadat's trip to Jerusalem. Furthermore, it is extremely surprising to hear from the president of a superpower that it is no substitute for the two parties in the conflict. This would imply that the United States either has no control over them, or considers the status quo acceptable in relation to its global strategic interests. Indeed, it seems unimaginable that the United States would approach a conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran with neutrality, or express frustration about its inability to influence the parties. It is equally unthinkable that the United States would let an Asian conflict develop on the pretext that it did not have enough influence to force the parties to reach an agreement. The fact of the matter is that a great power is only powerless when it chooses to be so. The status quo undeniably hurts U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East. However, Washington does not want a showdown with Israel, over which it wields considerable influence but whose position in U.S. domestic politics immunizes it against any strong pressure from the U.S. President. This has nothing to do with American decline.

With regards to Iraq, all official U.S. statements have perpetuated the fiction of a mission accomplished in line with Obama's account. Reality is substantially different. The United States has done its best to maintain up to 20,000 servicemen in Iraq beyond the fateful date of December 2011 because the country's situation is far from stable.

Under these circumstances the United States has an understandable interest in negotiating a new agreement with authorities in Baghdad that were in favor of extending U.S. presence anyway. So why hasn't the agreement, although apparently desired by both parties, been implemented? The answer is relatively simple. The issue is not so much the presence of American forces as it is their legal status. From the beginning, the two countries' positions were very different. The United States requested immunity for its troops as a pre-condition for any extension; and the immunity had to be ratified, not just granted, by the Iraqi government. The State Department set the bar very high, and perhaps even higher than that which was sought by the U.S. military whose priority was to contain the Iranian threat in the region.

That being said, the main difficulty stemmed from the Iraqis' extreme sensitivity on issues of sovereignty and the impossibility of assuming political responsibility for an agreement that places American forces outside of any Iraqi jurisdiction. Rightly or wrongly, such provisions would have been applied as a prolongation of the American occupation, even if Iraqis worry about U.S. withdrawal. In the end, with the exception of

Japan, a liberated country rarely becomes an ally. This key lesson applies to Baghdad and can also be expected to apply to Kabul. Unfortunately, the exact opposite happened. Kurdistan has already embarked on a path toward increased autonomy while the Sunnis are becoming increasingly marginalized by a sectarian and authoritarian central government. This has implications for the regional balance since Baghdad is growing closer to Tehran in order to counterbalance Ankara, which is seen as a protector of the Sunnis. The Iraqi prime minister's statement in Washington that he was more concerned about Turkey than Iran shows the huge gulf between Iraq and the United States. Moreover, the latter has lost all significant political influence on Iraqi affairs. In a disturbing development, the United States decided not to use its last card, arms sales. There can no longer be any doubt that the occupation of Iraq was a huge strategic defeat for the United States because it ultimately has only served to strengthen Iran. Still, Obama lacks a medium-term vision to deal with the seriousness of the situation. This oversight will cost him sooner or later and one of two things will happen: either the tighter containment of Iran through sanctions on oil exports will take effect and weaken Iran or it will fail and inexorably lead the United States on the path to a new war in the Middle East. At this stage, Washington wants to discourage Israel from bombing Iran because of the devastating effect of such a move on the whole region. An Israeli strike not endorsed by the United States will be regarded as a serious blow to U.S. policy in the region and a confirmation of the United States' inability to control Israel in a region in which American interests are at stake. Obama believes he can avoid this extreme situation. In diplomacy, anything can happen and the worst-case scenario is never guaranteed. The problem is that Obama has a strong tendency to overestimate his ability to act and influence actors that are much weaker than the United States but are particularly sly. What is true for Iraq is also true for Afghanistan. Obama can pride himself on having eliminated Bin Laden, which was undoubtedly a success but a failure in addressing the root cause of the problem. Despite the thirteen year military presence involving the deployment of over 100,000 troops and the expenditure of 550 billion dollars, the United States still has not succeeded in creating a credible alternative to the Taliban. He started talking to them in Doha , but the discussions were far from a breakthrough. Even worse, its political alliance with Pakistan has frayed. Relations between Washington and Islamabad have regressed back to where they were before September 11, marked by deep mutual distrust. Pakistani leaders obviously bear heavy responsibility for this failure. Still, if the United States was unable to involve Pakistan in resolving the Afghani conflict, it is simply because it did not give Islamabad what it wanted, namely a shift in the regional balance of power at the expense of India. The reproduction in Afghanistan of an Iraqi scenario seems probable. For a certain period of time the United States will maintain a restricted military presence before withdrawing with no serious leverage on local actors. Iraq and Afghanistan reveal the rising inability of the United States to confront asymmetrical conflicts in the world. With the rise of challenges, U.S. foreign policy seems more constrained than ever.

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