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Report

Obama and the Arab World Part I: His Worldview and Foreign Policy Vision

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In the aftermath of the attacks of September 11th, 2001, President George W. Bush and his security team charted a new foreign policy course designed to eliminate threats stemming from state or non-state actors that challenged America's preeminent role in the international system. To defeat a new kind of enemy, undeterred by the threat of prosecution and unrestricted by practical humanitarian constraints, the United States would go on the offensive and wage all-out war against real and imagined foes.

Bush's "Freedom Agenda" relied on the unilateral expression of overwhelming force to protect the American homeland, consolidate US hegemony worldwide, and engineer social and political change in the Arab Middle East. In Bush's words, the strategy "was idealistic in that freedom is a universal gift from Almighty God. It was realistic because freedom is the most practical way to protect our country in the long run."

After the eight tumultuous years of the Bush administration, which left the United States on the verge of financial ruin, and widened the mistrust and animosity between America and Muslim peoples and societies, Barack Obama has sought to chart a new course in American foreign policy. To understand Obama's foreign policy towards the Arab world and the international system in general, we have to understand his worldview, his vision, how he views America's role in the world. It is only by flashing out Obama's worldview that we can make sense of his approach to foreign affairs.

The most important conceptual point to stress about Obama's worldview is that in contrast to Bush, who embraced the "Freedom Agenda," Obama has consistently refrained from offering an expansive foreign policy vision and has preferred to be guided by practical considerations and shifting tides. When asked to describe the "Obama doctrine" at the end of his first term in the White House, Obama responded, "[Mine is] an American leadership that recognizes the rise of countries like China, India and Brazil. It's a US leadership that recognizes our limits in terms of resources and capacity."

Obama's new way relies NOT on abstract moral values or brute military strength, but on real relationships and shared interests with other nations: "Recall that earlier generations faced down fascism and communism not just with missiles and tanks," he said, "but with sturdy alliances and enduring convictions. They understood that our power alone cannot protect us, nor does it entitle us to do as we please." Obama is a realist, not an idealist, who refrains from using force and military intervention to advance international liberal values.

More than four years in, it is now time to ask: Has Obama's realism been successful in overcoming the bitter inheritance of America's relationship with the Arab world and the Middle East?

Obama's Foreign Policy Agenda: A Clear Road or a Dead End?

While Obama has excelled at giving rousing speeches and distancing himself from Bush, he has not offered his own foreign policy vision. Conservatives lament that the Obama administration's foreign policy approach is fundamentally reactive and defeatist. One conservative critic, Niall Ferguson, has accused the US president of presenting one foreign policy in his speeches and another in his actions. The air is also thick with liberal disappointment given Obama's unwillingness to put closure to Bush's 9/11 wars and scars by not, for example, closing the US military prison at Guantanamo Bay and swiftly bringing US troops home. Several other people such as Robert Kagan and Zbigniew Brzezinski also criticised Obama for not having any clear plans.

Obama's White House aides counter by saying that the left and right's critiques overlook that the American President is an anti-ideological politician interested only in what works. Obama realises that the post-Cold War world is complex and requires specific approaches tailored to each situation. White House officials argue that in contrast to his predecessor, Obama stresses bureaucratic efficiency, modesty and humility over ideology and assertion of America's power and affirmation of its exceptionalism.

Resetting Relationships: The Cairo Speech

Throughout his first four years in office, Obama has reiterated his commitment to reaching out to Muslims and altering their negative perceptions of the United States. Time and again, he stressed that "the United States is not, and will never be, at war with Islam." In an early effort to reach out to Arabs and Muslims immediately after inauguration, Obama gave his first interview to *Al Arabiya* News Channel.

Obama's June 2009 speech at Cairo University addressed critical challenges and offered a new way forward for managing relations between the United States and the Muslim world. As Obama embarked on his first term as president, he had to contend with the damage the Bush administration had inflicted on the country's relationship with Muslims globally. Successive American presidents had visited the Middle East to speak but not to listen and repeatedly saw the region only in the globalist terms of the Cold War, geopolitics, Israel, and more recently, the War on Terror.

Obama recognised that this legacy, which had debilitated America's standing in the region, was not sustainable and sought to use the power of the presidential pulpit to cut America's losses and begin bringing US troops home. Instead of adopting a more constructive approach—one that drew distinctions among the many faces of political Islam—Obama's predecessors took the easier, reductionist approach of lumping all Islamists together. Mainstream and militant Islamists were seen only through the prism of al-Qaeda. This served Bin Laden's agenda by portraying all forms of Islamic fundamentalism, ranging from Hamas to the Muslim Brotherhood, as equivalent to jihadism, a violent, totalitarian fringe ideology dedicated to random destruction, global subjugation, and the defeat of the West.

Given this volatile and polarised context, Obama's new discourse of engagement, co-existence, and reconciliation between Muslims in the East and Christians in the West was a major point of departure from the Bush administration. The new tone of humility and partnership in Obama's Cairo speech and in the immediate aftermath raised expectations that he would change US foreign policy in the Middle East.

The National Security Strategy of 2010

While Obama has been reticent about declaring a doctrine in his name, he has used his National Security Strategy (NSS), as did Bush, to articulate a foreign policy strategy. His National Security Strategy of 2010 called for a rebalancing of America's global commitments away from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that had distracted the country from its more pressing 21st century challenges in Asia and the Pacific Ocean.

Obama adeptly recognised that the world feels cynical about America preaching democracy. He modestly stated: "We [America] promote our values above all by living them at home." Instead of defining what American values are, Obama suggests subtly that American values are ones that all people share and that these common values are what all of humanity seeks. In contrast to Bush's National Security Strategies of 2002 and 2006, Obama devoted a significant section of his NSS to strengthening America at home.

Obama and the Middle East Problem

Obama distinguished himself from many other sitting presidents by referring to the Qur'an and speaking frankly about the suffering of the Palestinian people. He is the first US president to closely link the establishment of a Palestinian state to America's strategic interests. Although he has yet to flesh out the specifics of his vision of a two-state solution, he made it very clear that the United States would not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories.

"Israelis must acknowledge that just as Israel's right to exist cannot be denied," he declared, "neither can Palestine's." These powerful words delivered by the president of the world's most powerful country—and Israel's most significant patron—had enormous potential if followed by concrete actions. The pro-Israel lobby, which has significant influence in US politics, attacked Obama for going too far in pressuring the right-wing

government led by Benjamin Netanyahu. Pro-Likud voices and pro-Israel hardliners in the United States denounced the Cairo speech as "a renunciation of America's strategic alliance with Israel."

Although Obama's foreign policy has been cautious and incremental rather than transformational, it held the potential to achieve transformational outcomes but Obama failed to fully engage with the region and invest precious domestic political capital in his first term. It is no wonder then that the Palestinian-Israeli peace process has been his greatest political failure. The emergence of Benjamin Netanyahu's staunchly right-wing government in the March 2009 election has stalled any genuine steps toward peace. Netanyahu and his even more hard-line coalition partners do not recognise the need for a peaceful settlement with the Palestinians. Even though Netanyahu has met various times with President Obama in Washington, he has refused to listen to both Obama and Clinton on the settlement freezes.

Obama has neither tapped into the presidency's extraordinary power nor fully utilised the extraordinary events in the Middle East to bring about hope and change in America's dealings with the Middle East. Hampered by entrenched special interests groups and Bush's continuing legacy, he has not been able to translate his promises into concrete policies. Although realists do not believe in domestic politics playing a role in international relations theory, time and again Israel and its supporters in the United States have exercised considerable influence on the making of American foreign policy towards the Middle East.

Mitt Romney and Obama's Detractors

As the 2012 presidential campaign progressed, Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney increasingly criticised Obama's foreign policies, particularly in the greater Middle East. For example, Romney asserted that re-electing Obama would result in Iran having a nuclear weapon, though without explaining how or laying out a different strategy. On Syria, Romney faulted Obama for not taking "more assertive steps" to topple President Bashar al-Assad, adding, that he is not "anxious to employ military action" there. Romney also accused Obama of tipping his hand to the Taliban by announcing a time line for withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan.

In reality, Obama has not departed from the Washington foreign policy consensus. His foreign policy approach is consistent with that of moderate Republicans. Like Secretaries James Baker, Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, Obama understands the limits of U.S. power and he is on record as opposed to open-ended military commitments abroad.

Throughout his presidency, Obama has aimed at retaining the status quo with a few minor corrections. While he has reversed some of the worst ideological excesses of the George W. Bush administration's foreign policy, Obama has only brought the United States back to the cautious middle.

Although relations between the United States and Arabs and Muslims are no longer as polarised and poisonous as they used to be under George W. Bush, the structure of the relationship has not shifted. The Obama administration has been unwilling and unable to bring about a breakthrough, particularly on the Palestine-Israel conflict. Another point that must be stressed is that the Middle East does not represent a priority on the Obama foreign policy agenda. The administration has shifted its foreign policy and economic priorities to the Asia-Pacific where Obama and his aides believe America's future lies.

Furthermore, the Obama administration has reduced its commitments in the non-oil producing Arab states and has relied on its regional and European allies to shoulder the burden and responsibilities of maintaining Western influence. Although Obama's rhetoric had given the impression of heightened US involvement and commitment to the region, his actual foreign policy priorities lie elsewhere – the rising powers in the Pacific Ocean. But as often is the case, by the end of Obama's first term approached, the Arab world witnessed major popular uprisings that forced Obama to become more involved in the region against his own will.

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