



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

## Report

# Obama and the Arab World Part II: Continuity and Change

**Fawaz A. Gerges\***



In the Middle East, the Arab popular uprisings have challenged Obama to prove the weight of his rosy words and show that he meant what he preached more than any other event. However, his varying responses to the conflicts in Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere have exposed a realist foreign policy focused on securing American interests abroad. Interests and power, not democratic promotion, are the hallmarks of the Obama approach to the Arab world. He has consistently pursued a realist foreign policy along similar lines to those of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton and has refrained from using military force to advance international liberal ideas. Time and again, he has stressed that he is a liberal interventionist and that he will send American troops overseas only when vital American interests are involved.

## The Arab Revolutions

The 2011 uprisings came as a surprise for American policymakers. However, White House aides state that in August 2010, Obama sent a five-page memo entitled "Political Reform in the Middle East and North Africa" to his top advisers in which he urged them to challenge the traditional idea that stability in the region always served vital US interests.

The US foreign policy establishment had not seriously considered or envisioned a post-autocratic Middle East and dismissed warnings about popular dissent as a domestic problem that the region's security services could contain. While Obama projected a new rhetorical posture towards the Arab World, he also recognised that America's core national interests – security of energy resources and stability of traditional US allies – must be preserved. Thus, it is no wonder that the Obama administration quietly embraced pro-American autocratic rulers, like Mubarak, whose help was needed in tackling terrorism, nuclear proliferation, energy security, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. This historic blindness stems from misguided concepts and premises about the structure of Middle Eastern societies and politics – an overemphasis on high and elite politics and a de-emphasis of the weight of social movements and public opinion.

With the lessons of Iraq and a pressed economy at home, Obama refused to take ownership of the Libyan mission and insisted that his European and Arab allies take charge. His preference was "leading from behind" as opposed to the Bush model of leading alone. However, in a last minute decision, he backed NATO's military intervention in Libya because he feared that, unless deterred, Gaddafi would carry out a bloodbath against the rebels in Benghazi.

Obama initially pursued a subtle and non-interventionist approach toward democracy promotion in the region. While he voiced his preference for open governments because they reflect the will of the people—an implicit criticism of Hosni Mubarak and other Arab autocrats—he did not address the widespread abuse of citizens' rights in many Muslim countries. However, Obama reportedly wanted to weigh the risks of both "continued support for increasingly unpopular and repressive regimes" and a "strong push by the United States for reform." According to a White House official, the review requested by Obama concluded that the conventional wisdom in US policy circles was wrong; just as the Tunisian protest movement gathered momentum, "All roads led to political reform."

The Obama foreign policy team, led by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, pursued a quiet, gradual, low-risk approach toward the promotion of human rights. The State Department released annual reports and stated in their speeches that there are human rights violations in the Middle East. As the Egyptian crisis reached a climax in the first week of February, Obama implicitly called for the change of the ruler. He had to abandon two loyal friends in Egypt and Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Throughout the heated debate among his advisers, Obama's overriding concern was effective management of the crisis and smooth political transition. Obama and his Secretary of State feared that like other revolutions, the Egyptian revolution could be hijacked by anti-democratic Islamist forces. Islamic-based groups and movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Hezbollah are viewed suspiciously and considered a threat to national interests. In contrast, pro-Western autocratic rulers are seen as the lesser of two evils—pliant, durable, and predictable.

Saudi Arabia opposed Obama's positive approach towards the protesters in Tunisia and Egypt and rebuffed US efforts to influence Gulf countries to institute meaningful reforms and meet the legitimate aspirations of their people. Saudi leaders described the Obama stance as naive and dangerous. Bahrain provided a test of wills between a divided US administration and Saudi Arabia, a determined regional neighbor. Initially, the Obama foreign policy team cautioned the Al Khalifa royal family in Bahrain against using excessive force against its people and encouraged King Hamad to undertake serious reforms to avert a prolonged political crisis and violence. A Saudi GCC-led military force entered Bahrain and the local authorities allowed these Saudi forces to suppress the protesters. In justifying its military intervention, the Saudis and the Obama administration accused Iran of infiltrating the Arab Shi'a population and hijacking their political demands for geostrategic advantage. After meeting King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in April 2011 – a meeting that marked the thawing of tensions, then Defense Secretary Gates acknowledged that he did not even raise the question of Saudi intervention in Bahrain. Gates and the Saudi king discussed more pressing issues, such as the sale of more than \$60 billion worth of arms, the biggest arms deal signed by the United States, and the modernisation of the kingdom's missile defence system.

The 2011 Arab uprisings forced Obama to reconsider his engagement with the region. On the one hand, he recognised the significance of the moment in the Arab world as "a time of transformations" and called on the world to respond to the calls for change elsewhere in the region, particularly in Syria. On the other, he separated the Arab world's pursuit of dignity and freedom from the Palestinians' pursuit of those same ideals. By doing so, he risked being seen as hypocritical as he alienated the rising forces to whom he was reaching out.

### **Playing Regional Chess in 2011**

Obama fully embraced the nascent order in the two countries but offered no Marshall Plans to help repair broken Middle Eastern institutions and economies. His offer of paltry sums of aid testifies to his foreign policy priorities and America's hard-pressed economy. In contrast to his Cairo speech two years earlier, Obama's address neither elicited much public interest nor raised high expectations in the region.

Obama's position reflects the diversity of views of his foreign policy team, uncertainty over the meanings and effects of the uprisings, and his awareness of the limits of America's power and relative decline. Saudi Arabia in particular as a strategic ally was not mentioned once in his hour-long speech in order to avoid lumping it with Egypt and Tunisia. He cares less about consistency and more about successful outcomes and maximising American bargaining power. The weight of evidence clearly show he will not invest precious political (presidential) capital on risky foreign policy issues that face domestic resistance at home and that do not fall within what he perceives as vital American interests.

For example, after his initial attempt to help broker a Palestinian-Israeli peace process, Obama has taken a cautious stance. Netanyahu's opposition has frustrated Obama's quest. Instead of challenging Netanyahu and exerting more pressure on him to accept a sensible solution, Obama let the Israeli prime minister off the hook. Obama squarely lost the first and final round because he was unwilling to spend more political capital at home. He recognised the costs of his domestic and foreign policy agenda and cut his losses. Given his worldview and priorities, it is doubtful if he will make another major drive to broker a peace settlement between the Palestinians and Israelis.

Recently, Obama reportedly bemoaned Netanyahu's decision to build more settlements on occupied Palestinian lands. He reportedly called Netanyahu a "coward" because of his failure to meet the Palestinians halfway and said that he expected Netanyahu to continue his reckless ways. In his second term in office, Obama will most likely avoid pursuing efforts to broker a peace settlement because he sees conditions unsuitable for such. What this means is that he does not seem to be inclined to exert pressure on Israel – America's strategic client in the region.

## Moving Forward?

With Obama newly sworn in for a second term as president of the United States, he thus faces a significant test; he could seize the opportunity and craft a strategy of his own that takes into account the change occurring in the region or he could leverage this strategy to re-engage the region and transform America's relations with the Middle East and Muslim world. However, he must first come up with a clear plan because the region has fundamentally changed.

It is fair to say that continuity, not change, will be the defining feature of Obama's policies towards the Middle East in his second term.

From the beginning of his presidency, Obama has been reluctant to use force except when US national security is directly affected, and even in such cases, he has emphasised a drawn-down approach instead of an escalation. Syria is a case in point. Despite pressure by Republican politicians and a bloodbath in Syria, he has resisted calls for direct intervention in Syria. First, as argued previously, Obama has pledged to send American soldiers in harm's way only if primary American interests are engaged. The Obama administration does not view vital US interests as involved in Syria, a small, poor country that does not impact the United States. Instead, Obama has limited American involvement in Syria to providing political and financial support to the opposition and waging a war-by-other-means against al-Assad's regime: economic warfare.

Although the Obama administration insists that al-Assad must step down, it does not have the will or desire to intervene militarily because of fears of regional and international escalation. There is also anxiety within the administration about the rise in strength of radical jihadist groups like Al-Nusra Front and a repetition of the Iraqi and Libyan scenarios. In a way, the Obama administration prefers a political settlement that eases al-Assad out of power to a prolonged armed conflict that may destroy the Syrian state and the complex social fabric of the country. These anxieties partly explain the low level approach of the Obama administration towards Syria and the reluctance to take a more forceful and direct approach toward the raging conflict in the war-torn country. Obama aides have hoped that the opposition will make important military gains that will force al-Assad out without direct Western military intervention. The Obama administration has also hoped that Russia may change its position on Syria and exert pressure on al-Assad to get him to step down. Neither approach has borne fruit. The result is a diplomatic and political deadlock and military stalemate. There is no evidence to show that Obama will shift his position on Syria in the foreseeable future unless something catastrophic happens there, such as al-Assad's use of chemical weapons. For now, the Syrian tragedy continues with no light at the end of the tunnel.

Although Obama has recognised the complexity of social and political conditions in the region, he has not departed from Washington's foreign policy consensus. He understands the complex issues of the Middle East on an intellectual level but is too timid. In May 2011, he announced an important policy shift, stating that the United States would now be guided by support for democratic transitions and reform. Yet he has not invested enough political and financial capital in assisting transitioning Arab societies in the development of their shattered economies and institutions through neutral multilateral, nongovernmental organisations such as the United Nations.

While Obama has used hard and soft power to maintain a stable course, he has neither tapped into the presidency's extraordinary power nor fully utilised extraordinary events in the Middle East after the Arab uprisings to effect change in America's interaction with the region. While certainly shifting his approach significantly from that of Bush, he has not pursued a transformational foreign policy and has refrained from challenging the predominant narrative in Washington.

Obama's policy toward Turkey has shored up ties with rising geostrategic and geo-economic power; his outreach to Muslims has been largely positive, though marred by inconsistencies; his Israel-Palestine policy is a dismal failure, a casualty of domestic politics and timidity; his policy toward Iran is an uncertain gamble that might escalate

into military confrontation given the reelection of Netanyahu; his counterterrorism strategies have been technically successful but with high human and moral costs; his goal of withdrawing US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan has borne fruit; and his responses to the Arab uprisings have been a mixed bag.

---

\*Author of *Obama and the Middle: The End of America's Moment?* and Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science where he directs the Middle East Centre.

Al Jazeera Center for Studies

Copyright © 2013, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, All rights reserved.

