Obama and the Middle East

Rightsizing the U.S. Role

By Marc Lynch, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, October, 2015

Critics of U.S. President Barack Obama’s Middle East strategy often complain that Obama lacks a strategic vision. This is almost exactly wrong. Obama came to office with a conviction that reducing the United States’ massive military and political investment in the Middle East was a vital national security interest in its own right. The occupation of Iraq and the excesses of the war on terrorism had left the United States overextended, especially at a time of economic crisis. “Rightsizing” the United States’ footprint in the region meant not only reducing its material presence but also exercising restraint diplomatically, stepping back and challenging allies to take greater responsibility for their own security. Obama has adhered consistently to this strategy, prioritizing it ruthlessly along the way and firmly resisting efforts to force it off track. This was not a strategy much beloved in Washington or in a region hard-wired for the exercise of American power. But it was a clear and coherent strategy that led Obama to undertake major initiatives on the problems he viewed as rising to the level of core national security interests: Iran’s nuclear weapons program, terrorism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the war in Iraq.

Yet for all of Obama’s analytic acuity, the implementation of his policies has often floundered. His administration has consistently failed to deliver on the promises raised by his inspirational speeches. It has struggled to communicate its policies effectively to publics in the Middle East and has been unable to explain obvious hypocrisies. Efforts to remain evenhanded and noninterventionist have infuriated partisans on all sides who wanted unconditional U.S. support rather than an honest broker.

The administration has struggled to adapt when its policies have failed, from Israel’s refusal to freeze settlement building to Egypt’s military coup to the disintegration of the Iraqi military in the face of what would become the self-declared Islamic State, or ISIS. It has also failed either to restrain or to reassure U.S. allies, which have therefore worked, without penalty, to undermine many U.S. foreign policy initiatives. The Middle East’s autocrats had previously thrived thanks to U.S. security guarantees and a shared antipathy to Iran and Islamists, and they wanted no part of a United States that might support, however tentatively, popular demands for democratic participation, diplomatic engagement with Tehran, or the political inclusion of Islamist movements. Nor did Israel under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, ever more closely aligned with the Republican Party, want much to do with U.S.-led peace talks with the Palestinians or outreach to Iran.

The end result has been a gaping chasm between Obama’s analytic successes and his operational failures. Yet the administration has nevertheless gotten the biggest issues shaping the region right. It avoided any deep military commitments in Syria and extricated U.S. forces from Iraq, secured a nuclear deal with Iran, and endorsed the Arab uprisings. On other key issues, such as pushing democratization in Egypt and pursuing Israeli-Palestinian peace, it had the right ideas but failed to deliver. Changing the failed regional order in the Middle East and rightsizing the
American presence was never going to be easy, and the next president will likely discover a new respect for Obama as he or she grapples with the region’s continuing implosion.

A VISION UNREALIZED

When he entered office, Obama was determined to rebalance U.S. commitments to the Middle East. The repeated attempts to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace seemed quixotic in the face of a hostile Israeli government and a fractured Palestinian polity, but either success or failure would finally free Washington from a process that had consumed astonishing amounts of diplomatic time and attention for more than two decades. Similarly, a nuclear agreement with Iran would not only resolve a primary national security challenge without war but also finally allow Washington to pivot away from that issue to others, within and outside the region, that had been subordinated for over a decade.

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The Iraq fiasco deeply shaped the administration’s worldview. The administration correctly viewed the invasion of Iraq as a catastrophic misjudgment that had opened the doors to humanitarian suffering, civil war, virulent new forms of jihadism, and greater Iranian regional power. Obama saw that the 2007 U.S. troop surge had reduced the violence but failed to resolve the root political crisis. It was as clear in 2007 as it is today that military success would be irrelevant without political accommodation and that there would always be an insatiable demand for more troops, more weapons, and more commitment. Even if the Bush administration had not bequeathed to him a status-of-forces agreement mandating the ultimate withdrawal of all U.S. troops, and even if the Iraqi government had not wanted the troops to leave, Obama would still have had no interest in keeping large numbers of U.S. forces in Iraq.

The withdrawal from Iraq was a priority from the beginning, carefully implemented and successful on its own terms. No number of U.S. troops would have made a lasting difference in Iraq. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki ignored U.S. guidance when tens of thousands of U.S. troops were on the ground, and he would have continued to pursue personal power even had a residual force stayed behind. Nor was there any serious chance that the United States could have forced the Iraqis in 2010 to accept a government led by Ayad Allawi, a supposed missed opportunity. Iraq’s subsequent failure, the renewed civil war, and the growth of the Islamic State are due not to the U.S. withdrawal but to Maliki’s sectarian, corrupt rule over a shattered state. The withdrawal was well timed: had Obama not withdrawn U.S. troops when he did, the fall of Mosul would almost certainly have led to the reintroduction of tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers to refight the same futile war in defense of the same failed state.

Beyond resolving old wars, Obama resisted efforts to drag the United States into new wars. The chaos in Libya following the U.S.-led military campaign in 2011 only confirmed Obama’s instincts that interventions rarely work as planned and that no amount of U.S. military commitment can favorably resolve the region’s conflicts. This is why he, for years, kept the United States out of Syria’s quagmire, except for reportedly providing covert support for rebel
groups, despite immense pressure to do otherwise—an enormously wise decision that the interventionist policy community will likely never forgive.

THE IRANIAN PRIORITY

Obama’s nuclear diplomacy with Iran is a textbook example of a successfully conceived and implemented foreign policy: priorities outlined, resources allocated, outcome achieved. Obama’s team maintained the tenuous unity of the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, plus Germany) to achieve an agreement that met the most vital needs of all parties, with robust limitations on Iran’s nuclear program and staged sanctions relief. The deal delivers on the hopes of a generation of U.S. policymakers, against steep odds.

The case for the Iran deal has always been straightforward. Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons poses a major threat to U.S., regional, and global security, yet there has never been a viable military option for checking the country’s nuclear ambitions, whether it was Israel acting alone or a U.S.-led coalition. Sanctions could hurt Iran’s economy and put pressure on its leadership, but they could never on their own either bring down the regime or force it to capitulate. Hopes for regime change from below remained a fantasy, even during the height of the 2009 Green Movement protests.

That left only diplomacy, with the major questions revolving around whether two suspicious powers could strike a deal that would meet the demands of their cantankerous allies and domestic critics. The Obama administration found ways to thread multiple needles and arrived at a deal that meets the core needs of each side.

Many critics of the deal have raised serious concerns about the ability of its system of inspections to guarantee compliance and about the plausibility of restoring sanctions should Iran break its word. The deeper objection, however, is grounded in the fear that a deal is a prelude to an acceptance of Iranian regional hegemony. These critics fear that the nuclear deal will legitimize Iran’s hegemonic role in the region at the expense of the traditional U.S.-backed order, empowering Iran’s regional ambitions through sanctions relief and a diplomatic opening. They have thus sought to maintain the narrow focus on the nuclear realm and publicly signal the United States’ intent to continue to counter Iranian ambitions elsewhere in the region.

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This effort to limit the politically transformative aspects of the deal will probably succeed in the short term. All the players, from Saudi Arabia and Israel to Iran itself, will likely escalate confrontational behavior in arenas such as Syria and Yemen to demonstrate to domestic and international constituencies that they have not capitulated. Over the longer term, however, the successful deal will likely build a shared interest in its continuation and begin to create common interests. That could pave the way toward more effective campaigns in Iraq and Syria, although within clear limits. Obama has no illusions about the nature of the Iranian regime or the depth of the ongoing regional conflicts. The idea that the United States will realign itself with Tehran is a fiction invented mostly by critics on the right. The end state, for Obama, is not a reorientation
toward Tehran but rather the construction of a stable regional balance of power—one that does not require the permanent deployment of vast amounts of U.S. resources.

THE AUDACITY OF HOPE

For Obama, the Arab uprisings raised the tantalizing prospect of fundamentally changing the region’s toxic structures. On May 19, 2011, he gave one of the best speeches of his administration on the Middle East. He placed the Arab uprisings in the long sweep of history and aligned the United States with the protesters demanding change—puzzling, indeed, to the despots who had long counted the United States as their primary ally. The strategic vision and moral clarity in this speech were pitch perfect. Obama recognized the aspirations of Arab citizens suffering under autocracy while pushing both regimes and citizens alike toward democracy rather than violence. He was right to embrace the uprisings and to seek to channel them into democratic institutions. Although he failed to support the uprisings consistently across the region or to manage the political wars they unleashed, it was always unclear what more the United States could have done.

Whereas Tunisia’s uprising occurred on the margins of U.S. attention, Egypt’s struck at the heart of the U.S.-led regional order. The millions of Arabs who took to the streets in the first few months of 2011 rarely agreed on their ultimate objectives. What united them was an intense desire to break the existing political order, one in which Washington was deeply implicated. Obama nonetheless viewed the protests that swept the region through a guardedly hopeful lens, framing them within the vision of progressive and moral change that has so clearly run through his political vision at home. This was a remarkable and historically admirable stance, especially given the challenge the protests posed to U.S.-backed regimes.

This embrace of the uprisings was a gamble, of course, and Obama took real risks to try to realize a vision that has, at least in the short term, failed. Obama recognized that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak could not survive and helped broker a peaceful transition. He supported elections and democratic institutions in Egypt, even as Islamists won most of the 2011 and 2012 elections and governance crumbled. That gamble—supporting the inclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood within the democratic system—could have been transformational. Had the Brotherhood suffered a defeat in elections following its lost popularity rather than being overthrown in a military coup in July 2013, Egypt and the Middle East would be a far better place today. The administration’s public warnings about the anti-Brotherhood protests and the dangers of a coup have been vindicated by the repressive, unstable regime that followed.

The administration applied its vision for the Arab Spring inconsistently, however, and when forced to choose, it usually opted to sacrifice transformation for expedience in the service of its broader strategy of rightsizing. It rarely spoke out about the brutal repression of protests in Bahrain for fear of alienating its Gulf partners. It allowed Saudi Arabia to take the lead in Yemen’s transition, with predictably antidemocratic results. It struggled to find the right balance between supporting Egypt’s postrevolution leaders, whether military or Muslim Brotherhood, and criticizing their mistakes. It watched as postwar Libya collapsed into anarchic, violent chaos.
Obama read the transformative potential of the Arab Spring accurately, but he couldn’t figure out how to guide it in the right direction. This failure was partly due to the primal forces unleashed and partly due to the destructive role of U.S. allies that worked hard to frustrate any movement toward democracy. The complaint that the administration did not offer the resources necessary to support the political transitions in Tunisia and Egypt is both true and somewhat beside the point. The amount of money the United States was willing to offer the Egyptians was not enough to meaningfully affect their calculations, especially when putative U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were devoting far greater sums to promoting opposing policies. Egyptians who felt they were fighting an existential battle over the identity of their state had little interest in Obama’s advice, especially when the local media were attacking, insulting, and distorting his every move.

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The trouble went beyond implementation, however. Obama’s approach to the Arab uprisings was both visionary and incoherent. The administration sympathized with the aspirations of the protesters and hoped to encourage democratic transitions. But it struggled to grasp the fact that the old order under attack was a U.S.-backed regional order, defended by U.S. allies concerned, above all, with keeping themselves in power. The right side of history, on which Obama hoped to place the United States, may have appealed to American values, but it viscerally challenged American interests. When the transitions failed, ending in authoritarian retrenchment or state collapse, the administration had few fallback options beyond cutting its losses and grudgingly accepting the new realities.

**WARS, FOUGHT AND UNFOUGHT**

Obama always wanted to extricate the United States from existing wars and avoid being dragged into new ones. He has largely succeeded. It is difficult to get credit for things that have not happened, but it is all too easy to imagine a United States today fighting major counterinsurgency campaigns in multiple Arab countries. That the United States currently has only a relatively small number of troops in advisory and support roles in Iraq, and an even more limited presence in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, is a major accomplishment on its own merits.

Before launching an air campaign against the Islamic State, Obama strayed from his rule of avoiding military interventions only once, in Libya. The humanitarian intervention there was, and remains, defensible. Had the United States not acted, it is almost certain that great bloodshed would have followed as the world watched and blamed the West for failing to protect civilians. The Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi showed no real signs of willingness to compromise, and he would likely have survived in power against a long, grinding insurgency. That would have been a crushing blow to the then vital Arab uprisings, emboldening other challenged leaders to escalate their use of military force.

Washington’s use of airpower and indirect military aid was therefore justifiable, saving thousands of lives and speeding the fall of a particularly nasty dictator. Libya’s subsequent collapse, however, provided ample support for skeptics of the intervention and should force a
deeper rethinking of the virtues of military action in the region. The partisan investigations of the events in Benghazi in September 2012 are a sideshow compared with the broader lessons of the unintended, catastrophic consequences of even noble interventions. The intervention inspired at least some within the Syrian opposition to escalate their armed campaign in the hopes of attracting a similar U.S.-led operation, with tragic results. Interventionists have desperately fought to distinguish the U.S. campaign from its later outcome, just as they did after Iraq turned into a fiasco, but this is a fool’s errand.

The Obama administration’s willingness to support the Saudi campaign in Yemen has been more cynical. Few in Washington believe the Saudi rationale for war, and even fewer believe the campaign has any hope of success. In reality, the United States was appeasing the Saudis on Yemen in order to prevent them from acting as a spoiler on the Iran talks, thereby condemning millions of Yemenis to pointless suffering.

Middle East power politics today are dominated by proxy wars and interventions. The disruption or collapse of governments in Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen has transformed those countries into open arenas for regional powers to wage their political conflicts. Iran mobilized Shiite networks and militias, and Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey mobilized Sunni Islamist networks of various denominations. The resulting proxy wars have been hugely destructive, opening the way to more independent and potent nonstate actors, such as the Islamic State. The United States has wisely shied away from openly joining this game, but this has left it with limited options on the new battlefields, as it failed to prevent its allies or adversaries from doing their worst. Nobody has won the proxy wars, which have caused immense human suffering and exacerbated the core problems of state failure and radicalization.

The defining issue of Obama’s tenure will likely be Syria, whose bloodshed, radicalization, and regional destabilization will haunt the Middle East for decades to come. Few policies have been criticized more widely than Obama’s refusal to become militarily involved in support of Syria’s insurgency. It is easy to understand the outrage in the face of the Syrian regime’s unrelenting carnage and daily evils. But the hard reality, which Obama understood, is that none of the popular proposals for intervention would have made things better. Syria was doomed to its horrific civil war almost from the moment President Bashar al-Assad chose to resort to military repression to stay in power and his opponents chose to take up arms and transform a peaceful uprising into an insurgency. U.S. forces could have been more or less deeply involved in the civil war that followed, but no degree of U.S. military intervention would have solved the problem. Even a large-scale military action would likely have failed, as the fruitless occupation of Iraq so painfully demonstrated.

Supporters of a Syria intervention usually insisted that they did not want U.S. boots on the ground. But the Obama administration was keenly aware of the pressures for escalation that would have followed even a limited operation, because the ideas for a limited U.S. intervention made little sense. Assad was not going to run away at the first sign of NATO bombers, and the limits of airpower have been demonstrated by the air campaign in Iraq and Syria against the Islamic State. A no-fly zone might have quickly grounded Assad’s air force, but it would not have protected rebels from mortars or ground actions. Providing antiaircraft weapons to the rebels would have made a tactical difference but would also have posed a threat to civil
aviation. The U.S. military would have had to defend any safe areas that it declared, which could not be done from the air alone.

Arming the opposition, the most popular proposal and one that the United States has fitfully pursued, was always the least likely to succeed. The Syrian opposition was from the beginning hopelessly fragmented and has become increasingly radicalized as the war has ground on. As early as 2012, huge amounts of money and guns were already flowing to opposition groups from the Gulf countries and Turkey, and covert U.S. operations were already under way. But there were few effective and ideologically acceptable groups that the United States could comfortably arm. Arming the opposition would not have given the United States control over these groups, and it would have inevitably entailed U.S. support for extreme jihadists. Insurgents do insurgent things, and as the Syrian uprising morphed into an insurgency, it became increasingly radicalized and brutal.

Assad’s foreign patrons roughly matched whatever support came to the insurgents. As a result, increased external help for the Syrian rebels led only to a more destructive balance of power, with minor fluctuations in each direction within a broader strategic stalemate. And an empowered opposition was always going to become less willing to compromise, as was an empowered Assad. Short of an outright victory by one side, no balance of power could have compelled negotiations.

In the face of all of this, the Obama administration was wise to resist the slippery slope of intervention and instead to try to corral its allies, shape the conditions for negotiations, and alleviate human suffering. Its worst blunder, the aborted bombing threat of August and September 2013, demonstrated just how easy it was to get drawn in: Obama’s redline on the use of chemical weapons had been mostly a rhetorical sop to give the appearance of toughness, but once articulated, it became costly to abandon. Obama was wise enough to walk away and pay the reputational costs of backing down—but it is telling how near a thing the bombing was.

ISLAMISM EVOLVED

Obama came to office intending to defeat al Qaeda with a lighter footprint, through drone strikes, partnerships with local allies, and the cultivation of more moderate Islamist groups. He understood the nuances of intra-Islamist politics and seized the opportunity to divide the mainstream of Islamism from al Qaeda and stop the spiral toward a clash of civilizations.

For the first four years of his administration, this approach was largely successful. Al Qaeda lost political and organizational ground across the region, culminating in the May 2011 killing of Osama bin Laden. Mainstream groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates entered the political process following the Arab uprisings, winning elections in Tunisia and Egypt. Obama’s June 2009 speech in Cairo, in which he rejected the notion that the West and Islam were locked in an inevitable contest, launched his strategy against Islamist violent extremism to an effective start, as did the withdrawal from Iraq and the repudiation of the cruder brutalities of the war on terrorism. Obama’s willingness to work with the Muslim Brotherhood following Mubarak’s fall was a departure from decades of U.S. policy and the strongest signal Obama ever
sent that the United States believes in democracy regardless of who wins. By early 2012, Obama’s policies on Islamism were proving successful.

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Egypt’s military coup and subsequent weakening of the Muslim Brotherhood, the regional support for the Syrian jihad, and Maliki’s sectarian misrule—all of which, to some degree, the Obama administration opposed—were the primary drivers of the resurgence of jihadism in the form of the Islamic State. The intense anti-Brotherhood drive in Egypt and the Gulf discredited the idea of democratic participation, much to the relief of antidemocratic Arab regimes, and removed the protection against violent extremism that the Brotherhood had long offered. The Islamic State has benefited from the regionwide setbacks of the Muslim Brotherhood, which have removed a principle ideological and organizational competitor. As Obama’s team foresaw, Egypt’s rising violence, instability, and extremism are the direct result of this repressive turn.

Syria’s civil war created the environment in which jihadism could regain its traction after years of decline. The Islamic State itself grew partly out of the remains of the never-fully-defeated Iraqi insurgency and thrived under the sectarian misrule of Maliki. It has prospered amid the fragmented, multipolar Syrian insurgency populated by countless ideologically similar groups funded by Turkey and the Gulf states. Other shattered states have offered secondary opportunities to expand. The Islamic State has also, ironically, benefited from Obama’s success against al Qaeda; the killing of bin Laden created a vacuum at the center that invited challenge from the periphery.

Analysts have fixated on the Islamic State’s ideological particularities, often acting as if no insurgency in history has ever seized and governed territory, used graphic violence as an instrument of power, and indoctrinated its members. The Islamic State’s strength derives from the weakness of its adversaries and from its ability to capitalize on the failures of the Arab uprisings. The group has thrived in areas of religious polarization and state collapse: in Iraq and Syria, of course, but also in shattered Libya and post-coup Egypt. It has tapped into the same jihadist narratives and networks that once fed al Qaeda’s insurgenies, and its tactics increasingly involve the types of terrorist attacks once associated with al Qaeda. It feeds off of the perception of inevitability but could crumble quickly if setbacks begin to pile up. But even the collapse of the Islamic State would do little to reduce the broader challenge posed by sectarianism and jihadism, which flourish in the current regional environment.

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The Obama administration’s refusal to intervene in Syria challenged expectations of U.S. power and has triggered outsize fears among U.S. allies, upset the perceived regional balance of power, and generated new patterns of alignment and conflict. Obama’s strategy against the Islamic State exemplifies his broader view of the region. Obama recognizes the threat but does not exaggerate it, and he always weighs the costs of action against the benefits. Thus, he has responded to the
Iraqi government’s requests for assistance against the Islamic State with greater aid, air strikes, and the limited reintroduction of military advisers, but no leap back in.

Such restraint will continue to be resisted by all the actors whose strategies were shaped by the old state of affairs. During the Bush administration, Israel faced little pressure to make peace with the Palestinians, and Arab despots figured out that cooperation against terrorism and Iran would deflect calls for democratic reforms. Iraq’s prime minister enjoyed regular videoconferences with the U.S. president and inexhaustible U.S. military support. Few, if any, of the region’s leaders and elites were eager to disrupt a regional order that suited them so well. Recent public power plays by Israel and the Gulf states to extract more support from Washington reflect their uncertainty about their place in the new order.

It remains to be seen whether Obama’s policies will represent a transformational moment in the United States’ approach to the Middle East or merely a temporary aberration. Obama’s successor, whether Democratic or Republican, will likely try to correct his alleged failings with interventions. Much of the U.S. foreign policy establishment would like to see a resurgence of the U.S. military presence in the region, especially in Iraq and Syria. And so the next president will almost certainly rush to distance him- or herself from Obama, only to discover that the structural realities of the region justify Obama’s vision.