

Obama to the Middle East: Expectations and Implications (Part 2)

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Brief Analysis

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On March 18, 2013, David Makovsky, Michael Singh, and Dennis Ross addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at the Institute. Mr. Singh is the Institute's managing director. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks; ***Ambassador Ross's remarks were published as PolicyWatch 2050 (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/obama-to-the-middle-east-expectations-and-implications>)***.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

Whatever the past differences between Binyamin Netanyahu's previous government and President Obama, Israelis feel a close connection with the United States and value strong American leadership. Every stop the president makes in Israel this week will attempt to build on that sentiment. Although some may dismiss visits to the Shrine of the Book or Theodor Herzl's tomb as perfunctory, they are in truth part of a strategy to touch deeper chords in Israeli society. Obama will also flex his formidable speaking skills in addressing the Israeli people, reinforcing his commitment to their security and to peace in a manner that is bound to improve his public standing. This in turn could increase his leverage with the new Israeli government on Iran and the Palestinian issue.

The president's real challenge will come during the private portion of the trip -- discussions with Prime Minister Netanyahu are likely to be intense, and expectations about what they will produce should be realistic. While the two leaders agree on many issues, they do not have any illusions about each other: Obama knows that Netanyahu does not have former prime minister Yitzhak Rabin's political vision, and Netanyahu knows that Obama does not favor interventionist policies.

Among the topics discussed will be the Iranian nuclear issue, the potential for meltdown in Syria, and prospects for peace with the Palestinians. On Iran, Obama and Netanyahu's differing interpretations of the latest International Atomic Energy Agency report will likely lead to cordial-but-intense sparring. Their perceptions of progress toward a diplomatic solution likely differ as well: Netanyahu fears that the recent talks in Kazakhstan have moved the international community closer to a deal that would be unacceptable to Israelis, but Obama may tell him that this is the best possible deal, and that Israel should be grateful for American and European efforts that have led to unprecedented international pressure on Iran. In short, there are key differences that are unlikely to be bridged at this time.

Discussions on Iran might also be affected by the composition of the new Israeli government, particularly with regard to Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon, who does not appear to be as hawkish on the issue. Yet this does not mean that he or any other Israeli official has accepted containment as an option. In fact, Yaalon's outlook will likely be similar to that of former defense minister Ehud Barak, in that he will push for stronger American leadership. If Israel sees the United States taking a tough stance, it is less likely to take unilateral action.

Regarding Syria, the discussion will probably be limited in scope, focusing on Israel's operational strategy toward Hezbollah convoys rather than its views on establishing a potential border zone or dealing with the jihadist rebel group Jabhat al-Nusra. Israelis believe that the United States has not been decisive on Syria, and they worry that Hezbollah will acquire large quantities of strategic weaponry in the chaos. For them, Syria is primarily a defensive issue; they are unlikely to seek a role in reshaping the country post-Assad.

Regarding Egypt, Israeli officials believe that chronic instability has forced the government to focus on domestic issues, making Cairo unlikely to alter the peace treaty in the near future. Other Egyptian actions -- including progress in detecting and stopping Fajr rockets from entering Gaza and efforts to flood certain Hamas tunnels -- have helped improve Israel's view of Cairo.

Regarding the peace process, many Palestinian officials are brimming with confidence -- perhaps overconfidence -- that they have put Israel in a corner by isolating it internationally. In their view, the November UN statehood bid was a success, and it has fortified their resolve to appeal to the International Criminal Court (ICC). They have shown little interest in coordinating with Israel or reaching an interim agreement in any form.

President Obama should discuss the ineffectiveness of this unilateral strategy in his meetings with Palestinian officials. For instance, he could point out that entangling both parties in years of legal proceedings at the ICC would do little to bring them closer to peace. He should also bring up Prime Minister Salam Fayad's continued isolation within the Palestinian Authority -- a problem so acute that official PA media no longer report on his activities, despite the recent influx of \$600 million that had enabled the PA to pay full employee salaries for the first time in months.

MICHAEL SINGH

In 2008, President George W. Bush traveled to the Middle East two times, visiting Israel, the West Bank, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. It is worth comparing the region and U.S. foreign policy then and now, as the differences are stark.

In 2008, the Iraq issue was an important impetus for Bush's visits, and optimism on the Israeli-Palestinian issue was high -- his first trip came shortly after the Annapolis Conference, and the second came at a time when negotiations were deep underway. The view from the Levant was different as well: Hezbollah was waging war against the Lebanese government, and Washington was pressuring Syria to stop facilitating terrorism in Iraq. The U.S. relationship with Egypt was strong, though even then there were doubts about Hosni Mubarak's longevity. Washington's relations with the Gulf states were much closer as well.

Today, the Iranian nuclear challenge is perhaps the only issue that feels similar to the Middle East of 2008. Iraq is no longer a priority; Israeli-Palestinian negotiations are stalled; Hamas is more entrenched in Gaza than ever; Washington has come full circle on Syria by first engaging and then pressuring Damascus; the Arab uprisings have added a level of uncertainty; and U.S. relations with the Gulf states are much more distant. Even more striking is the different level of U.S. engagement in the region. In 2008, the questions that reporters were asking about Middle Eastern affairs addressed every minute detail -- this is no longer the case. The current perception in the region is that the United States is stepping back, as shown by its withdrawal from Iraq, passivity toward Syria, removal of an aircraft carrier from the Gulf, public talk of a pivot toward Asia, and increasing focus on domestic issues. There is truth to these claims -- although President Obama often spoke about engagement upon taking office, his record since then has shown a tendency to disengage.

The administration's impulse to withdraw is largely based on past mistakes, but many in the region believe that these mistakes give the United States all the more reason to take responsibility. The lack of clarity about U.S. policies and objectives has made allies unsure if they can count on Washington. Furthermore, transitioning states such as Libya and Tunisia are uncertain what the new regional order will be and are beginning to believe that strategic alliance with the United States is no longer as valuable as it once was.

As he travels to the region this month, President Obama should worry less about public opinion and more about shared interests. The first priority should be to convince allies that the United States will act in accordance with these interests. When it comes to Egypt, for instance, democracy promotion means doing more than supporting the victors of an election -- it means supporting the institutions of democracy. The administration should also have no illusions that rhetoric will be sufficient. Going forward, Washington will be judged by its actions, not its words, particularly on Syria and Iran.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Cory Felder. ❖

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