

Obama, the Arab Spring, and the Peace Process: Assessing a Pivotal Moment in U.S. Middle East Policy

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Brief Analysis

On May 20, 2011, J. Scott Carpenter, Andrew J. Tabler, and Robert Satloff addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Carpenter is the Institute's Keston Family fellow and director of Project Fikra, which focuses on empowering Arab democrats in their struggle against extremism. Mr. Tabler is the Institute's Next Generation fellow, specializing in Syrian politics. Dr. Satloff is the Institute's executive director and Howard P. Berkowitz chair in U.S. Middle East policy. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

J. Scott Carpenter

President Obama's May 19 speech represents a shift from the policies he has espoused since taking office. Over the past two years, he has made eliminating friction points with authoritarian allies in the region a key part of rebuilding America's image in the Muslim world, particularly in Egypt but also with Syria. In doing so, he has often avoided even mentioning the word democracy --his response to Iran's Green Movement in spring 2009 is a case in point.

The president's latest speech shows his intent to make reform and democracy a top priority. Yet for the most part, his remarks merely updated the Bush doctrine. An address along these lines would have been bold for 2008, but not

for 2011. As such, the speech lacked strategic vision. Had the Tunisians and Egyptians not already secured their freedom, the president would not have given the speech; it was effectively a post-facto corrective.

Moreover, despite the chasm between how Washington and Saudi Arabia perceive the Arab Spring, Obama did not single out Riyadh during the speech. The Saudis' reactionary role -- from Tunisia and Egypt to Bahrain and even Syria -- contradicts the president's shift and represents the primary challenge in advancing his policy.

On Syria, the notion that President Bashar al-Asad can lead a meaningful transition to democracy is risible and an insult to those who are peacefully struggling for democracy. If Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak, and Muammar Qaddafi were all told to depart, why is the White Houseless adamant on the need for Asad to step down? On both Syria and Bahrain, President Obama missed an opportunity to make a more visionary point: that minority rule is anachronistic, and that full transition to democracy while ensuring minority rights is the twenty-first century alternative. This is particularly true in Bahrain.

More generally, there was no mention of monarchies, whose legitimacy must be continually renewed -- as seen with Europe's successful monarchies, for example. The president could have praised Morocco and Jordan for the inchoate steps they have taken toward this end while encouraging them to go further, and again called on Bahrain to refrain from reversing course, as the emirate seems intent on doing.

Regarding economic prosperity, the president's call for reorienting the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's mandate toward North Africa was creative, adding another instrument to the existing toolbox of debt forgiveness, aid, and enterprise funds. Offering Egypt a free trade agreement would have an even greater impact, creating tens of thousands of jobs.

Andrew J. Tabler

President Obama's message that Asad must step down represents a significant strategic shift on Syria. This means that Asad must either begin a power-sharing process between his minority Alawite regime and the majority Sunni population or face international isolation. The president also openly addressed Iran's involvement, explicitly linking Damascus and Tehran.

Perhaps most dramatically, Obama was quite specific in his demands on Syria. Since the 1970s, Washington has shied away from making public demands on Damascus given the U.S. policy of constructive engagement, in which the peace process with Israel took precedence over all other issues. This policy began with the end goal of peace and then worked backward to attain it. As a result, Washington avoided openly criticizing Syria or introducing negative incentives lest the regime abandon peace. Yet Bashar al-Asad has not been as skillful as his father in playing this game, and Syrian malfeasance --including Scud missile transfers to Hizballah, interference in Lebanon, and nuclear activities -- eventually became too significant to ignore.

The United States, France, and Turkey now realize that although the regime is not yet at a tipping point, it is also unable to accommodate the protestors' demands. Asad can either rely on his minority-based security services to put down the protests or reform and cut a political deal. Yet any such reform would undermine his base, and this dilemma is slowly eating away at the regime. Indeed, his track record on reform already includes eleven years of lost opportunities. Asad mistakenly believed that he could open up the country, connect it to the internet, and raise domestic expectations, yet at the same time avoid passing legislation to fulfill his promises, such as in the banking and insurance sectors. The situation is now out of control, and the people continue to defy five military divisions to protest in the streets.

Leading up to President Obama's speech, Washington issued a number of sanctions against Syria, including executive orders and designations of individuals, Asad among them. Currently, most of these designees have been named for domestic human rights abuses rather than for Syria's regional behavior. The entire security apparatus has

been targeted, making them international pariahs. Although these officials probably do not hold any assets in the United States, similar sanctions in the European Union and elsewhere will make it more difficult for them to invest abroad.

Washington now needs a plan to bring an end to the Asad regime, whether through a power-sharing agreement or complete collapse. Either way, Washington should help the opposition plan a future without Asad.

Robert Satloff

President Obama's speech reiterated several previous U.S. positions on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, including criticism of Hamas, regret at Israeli settlement activity, and warnings against Palestinian efforts to circumvent negotiations via the United Nations. What was new was the president's official endorsement of a borders- and security-first approach to negotiations and his articulation of parameters for final resolution of those issues. Specifically, this included his statement that U.S. policy now envisions the final border between Israel and a Palestinian state to be based on the 1967 lines, with mutually agreed land swaps, and a "full, phased" withdrawal by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The result, he said, would be a Palestine that has international borders with Egypt, Jordan, and Israel.

This articulation of the U.S. view constitutes a significant departure from previous official formulations. Private discussions and negotiations notwithstanding, the official U.S. position has always held that UN Security Council Resolution 242, on which the peace process is based, envisioned the definition of "secure and recognized" borders that would be different from the 1967 lines. Moreover, over the four decades since its passage, the consistent U.S. understanding was that fixing the border to repair the security deficiencies that helped invite the 1967 war required moving the border eastward. Never before has a sitting U.S. president publicly suggested that repairing the 1967 lines requires Israel ceding pre-1967 territory. The swap idea, which evolved to meet Israeli demands to incorporate certain settlement blocs, is not new and may in fact be the key the Israelis and Palestinians choose to resolve their dispute, but this is the first time it has received the White House's public imprimatur. (For more on the land-swap issue, see David Makovsky's recent map project [Imagining the Border: Options for Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian Territorial Issue \(/templateC04.php?CID=301\)](#).)

More generally, a reading of the president's peace-process comments suggests that he has made a novel distinction in his view of the security and political relationship with Israel. Throughout his time in office, he has tended to separate the strategic partnership, which is strong, from the political/peace process relationship, which is tense. But there are clearly powerful strategic aspects of the peace process, not least the decay in Israel's deterrence that comes from rifts in the U.S.-Israel relationship on an issue as important as the ultimate definition of Israel's borders.

In terms of the peace process itself, President Obama repeated President Clinton's calls for a "nonmilitarized" Palestinian state and a "phased" IDF withdrawal from Palestinian territory, but he injected the new idea of a "full" IDF withdrawal, effectively rejecting the Clinton-era proposal of an open-ended Israeli military presence in three "facilities" inside the West Bank. Furthermore, he did not mention refugees, as though the issue were a purely emotive one without a security component. Last week's refugee march on Israel's borders highlighted that security challenge quite clearly.

Overall, the president devoted a huge amount of his "winds of change" address to the peace process, which resulted in the same distraction from the speech's main theme -- democracy and reform -- that he accused Arab leaders of perpetrating for years. In his June 2009 Cairo address, the peace process was one of seven items on his agenda; in his May 19 speech, however, it was one of only three themes. Indeed, he devoted 1,200 words to the peace process on Thursday -- 20 percent more than he did in Cairo.

Interestingly, the president did not really offer a rationale for continued emphasis and urgency on the peace process.

Two years ago, he stated that the stalled process was a major source of tension between Muslims and the West, but given that the recent Arab uprisings have had little to do with Israel, he did not repeat this claim on Thursday. Instead, he cited the international community's fatigue with a process that has failed to achieve results. Moreover, after injecting a set of new ideas, he did not offer a new mechanism -- such as a new envoy, a Middle East visit, or a negotiating summit -- to translate those ideas into action. Instead, he simply launched those ideas into the ether.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Andrew Engel. ❖

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