

# A Welcome but Incomplete Shift on the Middle East

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## Perhaps the most striking aspect of President Obama's May 19 remarks was how greatly they differed from his 2009 Cairo speech.

In his May 19 remarks on the Middle East, President Obama said he had come to "mark a new chapter in American diplomacy." If anything, however, the speech marked an evolution in the president's own approach to the region. It signaled an apparent move away from the policies he espoused during his run for the presidency and in his June 2009 Cairo speech, with the notable exception of his puzzling remarks on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the president's remarks was how greatly they differed from his Cairo speech. In those remarks, he addressed "the world's Muslims," and dwelled at length on U.S. attitudes about Islam. On Thursday, he did not mention the word "Islam" once. This is a promising change, as it suggests that the president recognizes that Muslim communities are not monolithic, and must like any other group be addressed according to local, practical concerns rather than as a global body.

Another notable difference between the Cairo speech and Thursday's remarks was the president's emphasis on democracy. In the Cairo speech, democracy was fourth on a long checklist of issues; on Thursday, self-determination and political reform were the president's top priorities. To be sure, Obama did not fully embrace democracy promotion: he put it in the category of "values," distinct from what he termed our "narrow interests," and his call to "promote reform and...[support] democratic transitions" fell short of President Bush's second inaugural pledge to "seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." If, as President Obama asserted, democracy is key to long-term peace and stability, then we should place its promotion squarely among our interests, and not merely treat it as a matter of faithfulness to our values, as important as they are.

The president also engaged in a bit of revisionist history, downplaying his predecessor's commitment to democracy promotion while glossing over his own indifference to the issue over the first two years of his presidency. For example, in asserting that he would "provide assistance to civil society, including those that may not be officially

sanctioned," he failed to note that he had in 2009 reversed a Bush-era policy of doing precisely that, choosing in Egypt to instead work only with NGOs approved by the Mubarak regime.

Importantly, President Obama did not restrict himself to general comments on political reform, but issued strong calls for change in individual countries, both friends and foes. His remarks on three countries in particular -- Iraq, Iran, and Syria -- indicate the extent to which he has jettisoned the ideas and rhetoric of his Cairo speech. Speaking about Iraq in 2009, he focused on the withdrawal of US troops and his intention to "leave Iraq to the Iraqis." [On Thursday], he extolled Iraq's democratic progress and pledged to "stand with them as a steadfast partner."

On Iran, any mention of engagement or of the president's respect for the regime was absent, replaced by a condemnation of Iran's hypocritical regional policy and repression of its own people. Far more could have been said about Iran, but this was nevertheless a welcome shift. On Syria, the president ratcheted up his rhetoric, telling Assad to reform or go. While the implication that Assad might, in fact, reform is implausible, this position combined with the previous day's imposition of sanctions on Assad should mark the end of President Obama's sunshine policy toward the Syrian regime.

Even on economic development, the president moved away from his Cairo themes. The subject was seventh and last in his Cairo checklist, but second [on Thursday] only after political reform, in likely recognition of the role socioeconomic stagnation and discontent has played in the region's turmoil. The substance of his economic remarks also shifted. In Cairo, he downplayed trade and did not mention investment, focusing instead on small-bore initiatives and pet issues such as "green jobs."

[On Thursday], in contrast, he emphasized debt relief, private investment, and the expansion of trade. The themes were right, but the substance was wanting. He did not mention free trade (a U.S.-Egypt FTA was begun but aborted by the Bush Administration in response to Mubarak's political repression), and failed to tie U.S. assistance to any democracy or human rights benchmarks. He also missed the opportunity to urge Saudi Arabia or other oil-rich states to join in the economic effort, despite the windfalls they are receiving from high oil prices at the moment.

The most disappointing element of his speech was the one that tracked most closely with his Cairo themes -- his comments on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In Cairo, he described the conflict as the "second major source of tension" in the Middle East, after violent extremism. Recent events have belied that sentiment, as people across the Arab world rose up not out of anger at Israel, but out of pent-up frustration with their own political and economic disenfranchisement.

The president's premise on this issue on Thursday was correct -- alternatives to the two-state solution, whether the unilateralism favored by Abbas or the violence preached by Hamas, are unacceptable. And he was right to observe that trends such as demography and the proliferation of rocket and missile technology increase Israel's insecurity and thus the strategic logic for real peace with the Palestinians.

His policy, however, was deeply flawed. The substance was dubious, and the timing was baffling. The President is surely aware that there is little prospect at the moment for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, in part because of the resentments built up over the last two years, in part because of the Palestinians' focus on building support for a unilateral approach, and also because of the recently announced Hamas-Fatah agreement. Yet he chose this inauspicious moment to announce changes to longstanding U.S. policy on both territorial and security issues, in ways which were widely interpreted as walking back assurances given to Israel by both President Clinton and President Bush.

While the President usefully clarified some of his positions in his Sunday morning speech to AIPAC, questions about his strategy were unresolved. In inexplicably focusing on settlements in the first phase of his approach to the conflict, the president soured his relations with both Israel and the Palestinians, and put the peace process into a

deep freeze. His latest foray into the issue will further fray U.S.-Israel relations, and encourage the Palestinians to believe that their strategy of unilateralism is paying dividends. If the objective, therefore, was to increase prospects for negotiations, the likely outcome is precisely the opposite. Savvy diplomacy, this was not.

In Cairo, the president observed that the question before the United States and the people of the Middle East was whether we spend our time "focused on what pushes us apart, or whether we commit ourselves to an effort -- a sustained effort -- to find common ground." Recent events have transformed the President's agenda in the region since those words were spoken, but the observation remains valid. To make progress in the Arab world or on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the U.S. must regain the trust and confidence of all sides. This will require patient work and smarter diplomacy. There are plenty of reasons to be skeptical, but also reason to be hopeful -- if democracy takes root in the Middle East, it can be a powerful ally in our search for common ground.

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