President Obama's Delicate Pivot: From Abbottabad to the Arab "Winds of Change"

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Brief Analysis

After appropriately exulting in the daring raid against Usama bin Laden, President Obama will connect that success to a broader theme -- the Arab "winds of change" -- whose prospects for success are certainly no greater than the 50/50 odds originally given for the Abbottabad mission. In so doing, the president will be hard pressed to maintain the aura of relevance, determination, and derring-do that has dominated administration talking points in the days since bin Laden's killing. After all, as difficult and frustrating as the decade-old search for bin Laden was for two presidents, that historic achievement will almost surely prove to be much less complicated and demanding than the task of bringing to a successful conclusion the quest for Arab democracy. Even for a powerful orator, the nuance required to navigate the country-specific details of America's approach to the Arab Spring makes this one of the most daunting communication challenges of Obama's presidency.

Parsing the Lessons of Abbottabad

In recent days, the administration has drawn a link between Abbottabad and other aspects of its Middle East policy. For example, in a May 12 keynote address to The Washington Institute, National Security Advisor Tom Donilon drew a direct connection between the dogged, persistent pursuit of bin Laden and the administration's long-term commitment to prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear weapons capability: "The quiet and determined pursuit of bin Laden is not the only example of how President Obama matches his words with action. This is also the case with respect to Iran. President Obama has long understood the regional and international consequences of Iran becoming a nuclear weapons state. That is why we are committed to preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons. "Donilon's tagline was bold and confident: "We do what we say we will do."

Making this connection was timely and useful. With so much attention focused elsewhere -- Libya, Syria, "Nakba Day," and so forth -- Donilon delivered a salutary reminder that the administration appreciates the strategic context of the current situation, even if day-to-day events drive the news cycle. In the process, the president's *bona fides* on the Iran issue benefited from the impression left by Donilon's speech that, *in extremis*, the United States would not hesitate to either use military force or act unilaterally to achieve its objective, as was the case with bin Laden.

But not every Middle East issue benefits from the reflected glory of Abbottabad. After all, when applied either to the

Arab Spring or the peace process, the tactical lessons of Abbottabad seem irrelevant. In neither is the United States the key actor, nor will unilateral action -- even if bold and determined -- achieve the hoped-for result in either case. Indeed, the apparent inconsistencies of U.S. policy vis-a-vis the Arab Spring (e.g., calling for Hosni Mubarak's departure just days after Cairo's street protests took shape while refusing to denounce Bashar al-Asad despite weeks of protests and regime repression), combined with what certainly seems, at least in retrospect, like embarrassing certitude on the part of U.S. peace process policy (e.g., setting timetables for achieving an Israeli-Palestinian agreement and adopting a rigid position on the issue of Israeli settlement construction), only highlight the contrast between the administration's determined, flexible, low-key approach toward bin Laden and much of the rest of its Middle East policy.

The one message that does connect Abbottabad to the Arab democratic awakening is on the strategic level -- the fact that bin Ladenism was dead long before bin Laden himself, that is, Arab and broader Muslim public opinion had rejected the most extreme forms of violent, nihilist radicalism long ago. But with courageous Arabs making this point with their lives in Libya, Syria, and elsewhere, the president doesn't really need to host a major speech to add his voice to the chorus. And although the Arab Spring has provided an opportunity for the renaissance of other variants of Islamism that may be milder than bin Ladenism but are still intrinsically illiberal, anti-Western, and anti-American, it is unlikely that the president will dedicate his bully pulpit to warning about the dark side of this hopeful moment.

Learning the Lessons of the Past

A useful prism through which to assess the president's speech tomorrow is the extent to which he can find a workable framework for a very complex moment. In this regard, it is important to note how dramatically different the circumstances are today than when he spoke at Cairo University in June 2009.

When the president delivered that "new beginning" speech, his target audience was the world's billion-and-a-half Muslims: "I've come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition." He then discussed seven themes (violent extremism, the peace process, religious freedom, democracy, nonproliferation, women's rights, and economic development) and a series of relatively small-bore economic and people-to-people initiatives.

The volcanic events of the past 150 days make those words seem, in retrospect, jarringly odd and out-of-step. Arabs did not rise up in Cairo, Deraa, Benghazi, or Sana because they saw themselves as Muslims, but rather because they viewed themselves as Egyptians, Syrians, Libyans, and Yemenis. Nor did they rise up out of grievance against America, but rather out of grievance against their own leaders. As much as anything, the Arab Spring demolished the broad-brush pan-Islamic context in which the president first approached his relationship with his listeners. Whether, as some contend, the president's outreach to Muslims defused anti-Americanism in the Middle East and paved the way for Arabs to focus on their own internal pathologies, or whether -- as is more likely -- the outreach was generally irrelevant to the surge of popular revulsion at the corruption, venality and mismanagement of local regimes, the gritty reality of the various rebellions against Arab leaders should finally end the ultimately fruitless search for the seeds of Muslim rage against America.

The president's task tomorrow is far more complex than the one he set out to perform in Cairo two years ago. Then, the target of his rhetoric was a single, amorphous, undifferentiated group of Muslims, and the goal was simply to turn a new leaf. Now, if he is to say something serious, he cannot avoid delving into the gray complexities, the unsatisfying inconsistencies, and the urgent necessities of the moment.

Specifically, a successful speech will need to align America with the most positive aspects of Arab rebellions against

autocracy; reflect a balance between the hope and fear triggered in equal parts by seismic political change; signal American support for a process of democratic choice without suggesting indifference to the outcome of free and fair elections; project both disapproval and understanding -- but not endorsement -- toward those U.S. friends, especially in the Gulf, who refuse reform and repress its advocates; and explain why the maniacal dictator in Libya merits NATO bombing while the capo di tutti capi in Damascus does not even merit specific personal opprobrium for his outrageous behavior (or, alternatively, announce that Asad deserves no less a fate than Qadhafi and Mubarak).

In a key segment of this speech, the president needs to go beyond platitudes to offer substantive and meaningful help to those forward-looking Arabs battling a rearguard effort by a coalition of Islamists and ancien regimists to inherit the benefits of revolution. This is likely to involve a major aid package, focused on debt relief and OPIC guarantees, that will form a pillar of larger international assistance. Here, the medium is the message -- to have real political impact, the assistance needs to be visible, timely, and not a smoke-and-mirrors reprogramming of existing initiatives.

And that's the simple part. The more difficult part of the president's speech is to outline a coherent vision of U.S. interests in this new, uncertain era -- an era defined as much by fiscal restraint at home as by tumultuous change abroad -- as well as a strategy that matches those interests. His listeners will want to know the impact of Tahrir Square on the contest between Iran's axis of allies and America's; how change has affected the time-honored list of American regional priorities; and what new mix of military might, financial aid, political engagement, and moral suasion the administration will deploy to achieve these goals.

Further complicating matters, some members of the administration -- as well as some foreign leaders -- want the president to use the stage to articulate a more comprehensive vision for how the United States can advance Arab-Israeli peace. Although no president can avoid the topic altogether in a major Middle East address, it is difficult to imagine a moment less propitious than the current one for a president to wade knee-deep into the muck of peace diplomacy.

On this issue, the president again faces the test of lessons learned. From his earliest days in office, he or his advisors suggested that the peace process was the most important issue on a crowded regional agenda; that resolving it -- by a specific date -- was a top priority; that failure to achieve breakthrough would handicap all other regional initiatives; that Israeli territorial concessions trumped Palestinian recognition of Israel's legitimacy as a prerequisite of progress; that securing a full halt to all Israeli settlement activity, including in east Jerusalem, was a necessary precondition for diplomacy; and that vetoing a wrong-headed UN Security Council resolution would ignite a firestorm of protest across the Middle East. The events of the past twenty-six months show that all of those propositions were not only wrong, but counterproductive.

The result is that the cupboard of U.S. diplomatic achievement during this period is strikingly bare. Neither Israelis nor Palestinians are blameless, but one cannot escape the fact that, after placing such a priority on the peace process, the Obama administration has brokered just three desultory weeks of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in nearly two-and-a-half years -- the least (and least consequential) Arab-Israeli diplomatic engagement since the 1973 war. Add to this the sad coda of President Mahmoud Abbas's decision to opt for reconciliation with an unreformed Hamas, effectively rejecting the five-year-old, internationally sanctioned effort to transform Hamas from a terrorist organization into a legitimate partner for peacemaking and opting to throw his lot in with his sworn enemies. A new approach to peacemaking would begin with internalizing the analytical errors that led to this sorry state.

The reality is that the "Palestine issue," as it is widely called, may be an emotive topic for many Arabs and Muslims, but it is not the driver of regional dynamics. In practical terms, the impact of Israel's peace with Egypt and Jordan and de facto relations with key North African and Gulf states, combined with the inward-looking focus of most Arab countries, has resulted in redefining the Arab-Israeli dispute to a narrower (if still bloody and irredentist) conflict

between Israelis and Palestinians. The Arab Spring only confirmed this trend. Indeed, even Arab commentators viewed the recent faux invasions of Palestinians across the Syrian and Lebanese borders more as desperate stunts in the Asad regime's shrinking arsenal than as manifestations of some new Palestinian strategy to challenge Israel.

In this context, although President Obama can hope that Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu comes to Washington with some new ideas -- perhaps even a more detailed vision for peace that could crystallize the choice that Palestinians will make should they hold elections next year -- it would be foolhardy for the president himself to invest limited capital in a process that promises diminishing returns. In fact, the peace process merits even less attention in tomorrow's speech than the president gave it in his 2009 Cairo address, when it was the second of seven items on his agenda. This reality also explains why he has chosen to address the annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee this Sunday.

In sum, by choosing to give a major address that effectively changes the topic of the international conversation from America's singular success against bin Laden to the multiplicity of U.S. policies regarding the Arab Spring, President Obama has taken on a sizable strategic, analytical, and communications challenge. A serious presentation will require him to sacrifice clarity for nuance, trade consistency for self-interest, and offer a rigorous accounting of U.S. strategic priorities. Although the speech is unlikely to project the soaring rhetoric of his finest orations, the reverberations of his words could have huge implications for how both friend and foe -- groups that are shifting rapidly in the Middle East -- view America's durability as the preeminent global power in a volatile region.

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