

Why a Case-by-Case Strategy Is Not Going to Work in the Middle East

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When administration officials insist that each country and each revolution in the Middle East is different and must thus be handled differently, they are correct. Case-by-case action is often wise. Case-by-case strategy is not.

In addressing despotic regimes, President Obama tends to pose a question and a challenge: we know what you are against, now tell us what you are for. Now, as he prepares to deliver a major address on the Middle East, the same question might be posed to the president when it comes to U.S. policy in the region. Whether or not his speech is deemed a success will depend on how convincingly he answers this challenge.

When President Obama took office, it seemed clear what he was for in the Middle East. In Cairo in June 2009 he outlined his objectives. Featuring prominently among them were progress on Israeli-Palestinian peace, easing the mutual mistrust between the United States and Iran through dialogue and engagement; withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq; and improving U.S. standing amongst Arab publics.

Almost immediately after the speech was delivered, the reality of Middle Eastern politics intervened. Iranians poured into the streets of Tehran on June 12 to protest a rigged presidential election, and were brutalized by the very regime President Obama hoped to engage. The U.S. response, which seemed to coldly prioritize negotiations with Iran's rulers over empathy with its embattled populace, was starkly at odds with the tone of the Cairo speech.

Since then, the president's initial agenda in the region has foundered, and many of the assumptions that informed his initial approach have proven mistaken. Engagement with Iran is not only no silver bullet, it is not new -- every U.S. president since Jimmy Carter has reached out to Tehran, all with disappointing results. Moving forward on Israeli-Palestinian peace requires that Washington win the trust of both parties. Instead, the trust of both was lost in one fell swoop over a highly public and ultimately unnecessary spat over Israeli settlements.

As for U.S. standing in the Arab world, it turns out, is tied less to comity and more to solidarity, which was in short

supply during both the Arab and Iranian uprisings. Our views on Islam globally are less relevant than our impact in the lives of Muslims -- and Christians, Jews, and everyone else -- locally.

These days, as the Middle East is gripped by a wave of historic change, U.S. policy appears at best slow and inconsistent and at worst increasingly irrelevant to events in this vital region. Like those we criticize, we find ourselves at risk of being defined by what we are against. We are against violent extremism, and the death of Osama bin Laden will rightly be touted repeatedly by the president as evidence of U.S. determination in the face of our enemies. We are against rapacious autocracy, but we are also against, more dubiously, U.S. involvement in what the administration has termed "organic" revolutions.

But what exactly are we for? Over the past weeks and months, we have given little indication apart from repeated intonations of our commitment to "universal values" which could apply as easily to the Medicare debate as to the Middle East. In Tunisia and Egypt, we spoke up only when forced by events. In Syria and Iran, we hesitate as regimes ratchet up their repression. Even in Libya, where we have called upon Qaddafi to "go," our military approach stands in curious contrast to our stated policy aims.

The president can clear up any doubts by affirming in no uncertain terms that the United States supports the spread of democracy in the Middle East, and will stand with those who stand up for their freedom. He can assert that our democratic values and our interest in stability are not in conflict, but mutually reinforcing over the long term. He can reaffirm the U.S. intention to lead the way in advancing freedom and economic prosperity in the region and beyond. And he can give meaning to these principles by outlining how we will support democratic transitions in Egypt and Tunisia, support protesters' efforts in Syria and Iran, and press for meaningful change elsewhere.

When administration officials insist that each country and each revolution in the Middle East is different and must thus be handled differently, they are correct. Case-by-case action is often wise. Case-by-case strategy is not. We must articulate principles before we can claim exceptions to them. We have heard a great deal in recent months about the administration's fears, worries, and caveats; on Thursday, we must hear about its objectives, and how it hopes to achieve them.

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