

President Obama's First Two Years in the Middle East

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President Obama assumed office in 2009 with an ambitious Middle East policy agenda. Atop the list of his campaign pledges, then Senator Obama vowed to pursue Israeli-Palestinian peace and re-engage in diplomacy with Tehran and Damascus. Given these grand plans, perhaps not surprisingly the first two years of the Obama Administration Middle East policy have been distinguished more by frustration than accomplishment. This is particularly true in the Levant -- in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Israel -- the focus of much of the Administration's regional efforts.

Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking has been the most obvious of the Administration's regional setbacks. Regardless of how one regards Israeli settlements in the West Bank, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that President Obama's approach has been counterproductive. Indeed, the Administration's mishandling of the portfolio resulted in the first cessation of direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in more than fifteen years, a loss of over a year and a half.

Other Administration initiatives in the Levant have likewise fallen short of expectations.

President Obama's most dramatic departure from his predecessor -- the decision to renew diplomatic dialogue with Iran and Syria -- has proven a predictable, though real disappointment. Despite taking the unprecedented goodwill gesture of legitimating the clerical regime by referring to Iran as "The Islamic Republic," discussions with Tehran focusing on the state's illegal nuclear activities failed and devolved to sanctions. While these measures appear to be having an impact, regrettably they came late. The talks never touched on Iranian meddling in Lebanon or the Palestinian Authority.

Meanwhile, the Administration's ongoing efforts at rapprochement with Syria have proved fruitless at best. Notwithstanding Washington's goodwill gesture to allow the sale of embargoed US-made 747 parts to Syria and President Asad's July 2009 invitation to President Obama to visit Syria, the bilateral relationship remains abysmal, in large part due to Damascus' seemingly perennial commitment to humiliate and undermine Washington and its allies. In the face of blandishment, reckless and destabilizing Syrian behavior has only increased.

For example, a year ago, after Washington tried to re-establish border security cooperation with Damascus on Iraq, car bombs -- courtesy of Syria, according to Prime Minister Al Maliki -- killed over 100 in Baghdad. Then, in March 2009, just weeks after the Administration nominated the first US ambassador to Damascus since the 2005 murder of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri, President Asad hosted Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad and Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah, and publicly mocked Secretary of State Clinton. The dinner in Damascus effectively scuttled the confirmation of a new US ambassador.

More recently, Administration officials expressed concern that Syria had transferred SCUD or Fatah 110 missiles to Hizballah in Lebanon. And it's widely believed that the Asad regime has provided even more advanced weaponry to the Shiite militia. Undeterred, the Obama Administration continues to court Damascus, trying to broker Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations with an eye toward the Holy Grail of splitting Syria off from its thirty-year strategic ally in Iran.

Absent periodic statements expressing disappointment with Damascus -- or complaining about facilitating the movement of insurgents into Iraq -- the Administration has persisted with its efforts to entice Syria out of the Iranian orbit, a tack that has confirmed the Asad regime's longstanding conceit that "no problems can be solved in the Middle East without Syria." This in turn has seemingly emboldened the anti-western alliance of Damascus, Tehran, and Hizballah, undermining other US interests and allies in the region.

Lebanon has been among the most significant casualties. During the past two years Washington's friends in Beirut have experienced dramatic setbacks. Most striking, despite winning the 2009 parliamentary elections, the pro-west March 14 coalition that orchestrated the Cedar Revolution is today once again at the mercy of Hizballah, Iran, and Syria. To be fair, this process started during the Bush Administration when Washington failed to effectively respond to Hizballah's 2008 invasion of Beirut. But the decline of March 14 has picked up pace in the last two years.

No doubt the deterioration of March 14 has been fueled by a perception that the Obama Administration is less committed than its predecessor to its democratic allies in the region. Perhaps Washington could have done more to reassure its Lebanese friends that its dealings with Syria would not come at Lebanon's expense a la 1991. What is clear, however, is that the Washington's close coordination with Riyadh on Lebanon -- once central to bolstering March 14 vis-a-vis its adversaries -- has faded during the last two years, replaced by a Saudi-Syrian detente.

This rapprochement has provided little if any tangible benefit to Riyadh, but for March 14, it has been disastrous. And it doesn't appear that the Administration made a real effort to prevent it.

Today, while the Obama Administration continues to rhetorically support March 14 -- Vice President Biden made an important cameo in Beirut prior to the

2009 elections, for example -- the sole identifiable remnant of a US policy toward Lebanon is the financial support for the Lebanese Armed Forces, which, after the cross-border sniper attack that killed an Israeli soldier this past summer, has become increasingly tenuous. Rhetorically and financially, the Administration continues to support the Special Tribunal on Lebanon prosecuting the killers of Rafiq Hariri, but it remains unclear what Washington would do to support the democratically elected government in Lebanon if Hizballah responds to tribunal indictments with violence.

Two years on, the Administration's experience in the Levant would suggest that it's time to modify expectations and adopt a more realistic view of what is possible. In English there is a saying that after a divorce, remarriage represents the triumph of hope over experience. For Washington and the Middle East, let's hope that President Obama's next two years represent the triumph of experience over hope.

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