

Obama's Middle East Delusions

by Efraim Karsh

As the only person to have won the Nobel Peace Prize on the basis of sheer hope rather than actual achievement, Barack Hussein Obama could be expected to do everything within his power to vindicate this unprecedented show of trust. Instead he has presided over a clueless foreign policy that has not only exacerbated ongoing regional conflicts but made the world a far more dangerous place. Nowhere has this phenomenon been more starkly demonstrated than in the Middle East where the Nobel laureate has abetted

Tehran's drive for regional hegemony and brought the regime within a stone's throw of nuclear weapons; driven Iraq and Libya to the verge of disintegration; expedited the surge of Islamist terrorism; exacerbated the Syrian civil war and its attendant refugee problem; made the intractable Palestinian-Israeli conflict almost irresolvable; and plunged Washington's regional influence and prestige to unprecedented depths,¹ paving the road in grand style to Russia's resurgence.



Iran's nuclear facility in Arak. Tehran's quest for nuclear weapons is, perhaps, the foremost threat to Middle Eastern stability, if not to world peace, in the foreseeable future. President Obama's policies have allowed Iran to move ever closer to producing nuclear weapons.

¹ See, for example, "[Global Opinion of Obama Slips, International Policies Faulted](#)," Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., June 13, 2012.

Duped by the Mullahs

Consider Tehran's quest for nuclear weapons, perhaps the foremost threat to Middle Eastern stability, if not to world peace, in the foreseeable future. In a sharp break from the Bush administration's attempts to coerce the mullahs to desist from this relentless drive, which culminated in five U.N. Security Council resolutions imposing a string of escalating economic sanctions,² Obama opted for the road of "engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect"³ with the presumptuous aim of mending the 30-year-long U.S.-Iranian breach and reintegrating the Islamist regime in Tehran into the international system.



President Obama is interviewed on al-Arabiya network, January 27, 2009. Two months later, in a videotaped greeting on the occasion of the Iranian new year, he reassured Iranians of his commitment "to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us." Obama's appeasing demeanor cast him as weak and indecisive.

In his first major presidential interview, given to the al-Arabiya TV network a week after inauguration, Obama promised that if the mullahs agreed "to unclench their fist, they will find an extended hand from us." Two months later, in a videotaped greeting on the occasion of the Iranian new year, he reassured them of his commitment "to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us," claiming that reciprocating this "new beginning" would win Tehran substantial international gains and "demonstrate the true greatness of the Iranian people and civilization."⁴ He amplified this claim in his celebrated June 2009 Cairo address to the Muslim world going out of his way to empathize with Iran's supposed nuclear sensibilities.⁵

Rather than win him the mullahs' goodwill and admiration, Obama's appeasing demeanor cast him as weak and indecisive, and this image was further reinforced by his knee jerk response to their brutal suppression of popular protest over the rigging of the June 2009 Iranian presidential elections. That the U.S. president—who had made a point in his inaugural address to dismiss "those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent" as being "on the wrong side of history" and who lectured Muslim regimes throughout the world of the need to rule "through consent, not coercion"⁶—remained conspicuously aloof in the face of the flagrant violation of these very principles did not pass unnoticed. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad demanded Washington's

² U.N. Security Council resolutions 1696 (July 31, 2006); 1737 (Dec. 23, 2006); 1747 (Mar. 24, 2007); 1803 (Mar. 3, 2008); 1835 (Sept. 27, 2008).

³ *The Washington Post*, Mar. 21, 2009.

⁴ *Ibid.*; *The Times* (London), Mar. 21, 2009.

⁵ "Remarks by the President on a New Beginning," at Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary [hereafter, OPS], June 4, 2009.

⁶ "Text of Barack Obama's Inaugural Address," *The New York Times*, Jan. 20, 2009.

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apology for its supposed meddling in the elections while Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, ridiculed Obama for privately courting Tehran while censoring it in public. "The U.S. president said that we were waiting for the day when people would take to the streets," he stated in a Friday sermon. "At the same time, they write letters saying that they want to have ties and that they respect the Islamic Republic. Which are we to believe?"⁷

Khamene'i was not the only one baffled by Obama's real intentions. In a secret memorandum to top White House officials on January 4, 2010, Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned that "the United States does not have an effective long-range policy for dealing with Iran's steady progress toward nuclear capability." He was particularly alarmed by the absence of an effective strategy to prevent Tehran from amassing all the major parts of a nuclear bomb—fuel, designs and detonators—while stopping just short of assembling a fully operational weapon, thus remaining within the bounds of the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty (NPT) while becoming a "virtual" nuclear power. "If their policy is to go to the threshold but not assemble a nuclear weapon, how do you tell that they have not assembled?" he cautioned in a nationwide television interview. "I don't actually know how you would verify that."⁸

Apparently unperturbed by this danger, in 2011, Obama passed a secret message to Khamene'i (via Oman's Sultan Qaboos) expressing readiness for nuclear talks based on a U.S. recognition of a nuclear

Iran.⁹ As Tehran was unimpressed, the president was forced to authorize harsh sanctions at the end of the year. But he did

so with the utmost reluctance under heavy congressional pressure and with the Damocles sword of a preventive Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear facilities hovering over his head.¹⁰ While the European Union followed suit with similar measures that further afflicted the Iranian economy, Obama refrained from carrying the sanctions to their logical conclusion, instead capitalizing on the August 2013 inauguration of the supposedly-moderate Hassan Rouhani as president to offer an olive branch to the mullahs. This approach culminated in the interim agreement of November 24, 2013, known as the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA), between Iran and the great powers—France, Germany, Britain, Russia, China, and the United States (or P5+1 as they are commonly known)—whereby Tehran agreed to curb some of its nuclear activities for a period of six months (e.g., to stop enriching uranium beyond 5 percent) in return for some \$7 billion in sanctions relief.¹¹

No sooner had the ink dried on the accord than it transpired that for the Islamist regime it was but a clever ploy to loosen the

⁷ *CBS News*, June 24, 2009.

⁸ *The New York Times*, Apr. 18, 2010; Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: W.H. Allen, 2014), pp. 391-3.

⁹ Khamene'i's speech, June 23, 2015, in Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Special dispatch 6131, Washington, D.C., Aug. 10, 2015; A. Savyon, Y. Carmon and Y. Mansdorf, "Iranian Officials Reveal that Secret Negotiations with U.S. Began in 2011," MEMRI, Inquiry and Analysis, no. 1185, Sept. 16, 2015.

¹⁰ "In Heavy Water: Iran's Nuclear Program, the Risk of War and Lessons from Turkey," *Middle East and Europe Report*, no. 116, International Crisis Group, Feb. 23, 2012, pp. 11-3.

¹¹ "Communication dated 27 November 2013 received from the EU High Representative concerning the text of the Joint Plan of Action," International Atomic Energy Agency, INFCIRC/855.

economic noose around Iran while holding fast to its nuclear ambitions. “In this agreement, the right of [the] Iranian nation to enrich uranium was accepted by [the] world powers,” Rouhani told his subjects in a nationwide television broadcast. “With this agreement ... the architecture of sanctions will begin to break down.” Two months later, as the JPOA was about to come into effect after two more months of haggling, Rouhani described the accord as “big-power surrender to the great Iranian nation” and pledged to defend Iranian rights and interests in the ensuing negotiations over the country’s nuclear future.¹² While Western commentators and diplomats whitewashed this assertion as a ploy to deflect domestic criticism, Tehran did not moderate its stance regarding the permanent settlement thus forcing the extension of the designated negotiating period by another four months to November 24, 2014.

Why should it have acted differently at a time when the Western powers were bending over backward to reach an agreement even if this failed to address the problem it was designed to solve? This was evidenced among other examples by the U.S. administration’s obstruction of congressional legislation authorizing new sanctions in the event of noncompliance with the JPOA; by the rapid breakdown of Tehran’s diplomatic isolation and economic strangulation;¹³ and by the apparent

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readiness to leave substantial parts of Iran’s nuclear infrastructure intact thus allowing it to resume its nuclear weap-

ons drive at will.¹⁴

Above all, despite its lip service to leaving “all options on the table,” the Obama administration not only showed a distinct lack of appetite for the military option but went out of its way to forestall a preventive Israeli strike, especially in 2010-12 when it seemed to be in the cards.¹⁵ Indeed, as the extended deadline for nuclear negotiations loomed large, the mullahs were reportedly mulling over a U.S. proposal that would allow them to keep many of their enrichment centrifuges intact in return for a reduction in their stockpile of low-enriched uranium, thus prolonging the time needed for building a nuclear weapon but not eliminating this possibility altogether as demanded by the Israelis and the U.S. president himself for that matter.¹⁶

As if to dispel any doubts about his appeasing intentions, in mid-October 2014, without telling any of Washington’s regional allies, and at a time when the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)’s director general warned that “we cannot provide assurance that *all* material in Iran is in peaceful purposes,” Obama passed yet another secret letter to Khamene’i proposing U.S.-Iranian military collaboration against the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) after the conclusion of a nuclear agreement—only to be peremptorily told that “Iran will not accept having an [uranium] enrichment

12 *The Guardian* (London), Nov. 24, 2013; *BBC News*, Nov. 24, 2013; Y. Mansharof et al, “The Geneva Joint Plan of Action: How Iran Sees It (1),” MEMRI, Inquiry and Analysis Series Report, no. 1050, Jan. 13, 2014; *U.S. News & World Report*, Jan. 14, 2014.

13 See, for example, “The Iran Primer: Western Countries Flood Tehran,” United States Institute of Peace, Apr. 29, 2014; Kenneth Katzman, “Iran Sanctions,” Congressional Research Service, Washington, D.C., Oct. 23, 2014, pp. 57-8; Lee Smith, “The Collapse of Sanctions on Iran,” *The Weekly Standard*, Mar. 3, 2013.

14 Olli Heinonen, *The Iranian Nuclear Programme: Practical Parameters for a Credible Long-Term Agreement* (London: Henry Jackson Society, 2014), pp. 6-7, 17-8.

15 Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Crisis in U.S.-Israel Relations Is Officially Here,” *The Atlantic*, Oct. 2014; *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), Aug. 21, 2015.

16 *Haaretz*, Oct. 16, 2014.

program that is nominal or decorative.”¹⁷ Small wonder that the November 2014 deadline had to be extended yet again, this time for a longer period of seven months to June 24, 2015.

When the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was eventually pronounced on July 14, 2015, it contained a string of glaring loopholes enabling Tehran to seamlessly sail to nuclear weapons after ten to fifteen years at the latest. These included, among other things, acquiescence in Iran’s right to continue enrichment activities and to retain up to 5,060 IR-1 centrifuges (and a smaller number of newer centrifuges) to this end. It also provided for deeply flawed monitoring measures such as a two-week notice for verification of “the absence of undeclared nuclear materials or activities inconsistent with the JCPOA” and non-interference “with Iranian military or other national security activities,” including a reported secret permission to Iran to inspect the Parchin military base where it had experimented with nuclear weaponization.¹⁸

Small wonder, therefore, that thousands of jubilant Iranians took to the streets to celebrate the JCPOA’s announcement while Rouhani triumphantly declared that “this is the day on which all the large countries and the superpowers in the world have officially recognized Iran’s nuclear activities.”

He further elaborated on Tehran’s four goals in the negotiations:

The first goal was to continue the nuclear capabilities, the nuclear technology, and even the nuclear activity within Iran. The second goal was to lift the mistaken, oppressive, and inhumane sanctions. The third goal was to remove all the U.N. Security Council resolutions that we view as illegal. The fourth goal was to remove the Iranian nuclear dossier from Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter and from the Security Council in general. In today’s agreement, in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, all four goals have been achieved.¹⁹



Islamists parade through Fallujah. With the final withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq in December 2011, the country that was left behind was anything but a “sovereign, stable, and self-reliant” state as Obama claimed. Some two years later, in January 2014, ISIS captured Anbar’s capital of Ramadi (though parts of it were subsequently retaken by the government) and the key city of Fallujah, where U.S. forces had fought two bitter battles a decade earlier.

17 *The Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 6, 2014; Yukiya Amano, IAEA Director General, “Challenges in Nuclear Verification: The IAEA’s Role on the Iranian Nuclear Issue,” address at the Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., Oct. 31, 2014, p. 4; *CNSNews.com*, Nov. 13, 2014.

18 See, for example, “[Full text of the Iran deal](#),” *Politico*, July 14, 2015, pp. 1, 6, 27, 29, 42-3; “[IAEA Document Reveals: Iran to Carry Out Own Inspection of Suspected Nuclear Site in Parchin](#),” *Haaretz*, Aug. 19, 2015.

19 “Iranian President Rouhani Describes Nuclear Deal, Says: The Superpowers Have Officially Recognized a Nuclear Iran,” TV Monitor Project, MEMRI, July 21, 2015.

Destabilizing Iraq

In fairness to Obama, the Iranian fiasco was not wholly of his making but was largely a corollary of Washington's ongoing entanglement in Iraq, which diminished its appetite for fresh foreign engagements. Yet the president's ingrained and highly publicized aversion to the use of force in pursuit of foreign policy goals undoubtedly made a bad situation worse, not merely by effectively eliminating the military option—the ultimate barrier to Tehran's nuclear quest—but by creating a power vacuum in Iraq that brought the country to the verge of disintegration. For although it was President Bush who delineated the U.S. exit strategy in his November 2008 status of forces agreement (SOFA) with the Iraqi government, Obama's eagerness to make good his electoral promise to leave Iraq within eighteen months led to a rushed departure in total disregard of its detrimental consequences.

By the August 31, 2010 deadline for the completion of the withdrawal's first stage (i.e., removal of all fighting brigades from Iraq), it had become evident that the country was beset by renewed anarchy with parliament failing to form a government in the wake of the latest elections, near-daily terror attacks exacting scores of fatalities, and dilapidated public services stirring widespread restiveness. Ignoring this grim reality, Obama went out of his way to present the Iraq withdrawal as a "powerful reminder" of the "renewed American leadership in the world" and boasted of "leaving behind a sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq" ruled by "a representative government that was elected by its people."²⁰

20 "Weekly Address: Renewing America's Global Leadership," OPS, Oct. 22, 2011; "Remarks by the President and First Lady on the End of the War in Iraq," OPS, Dec. 14, 2011.

In fact, the Iraq that was left behind was anything but a "sovereign, stable and self-reliant" state. Rather it was a hopelessly polarized society oppressed by a sectarian and brutal Shiite regime that retained power through ruthless, underhanded methods in the face of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's electoral defeat and used it to restore the all-too-familiar pattern of one-man rule characterizing Iraq since its inception.

Matters came to a head on July 23, 2012, when more than one hundred people were murdered and another 250 injured in Iraq's worst day of violence since 2010. A similar number of people were murdered on September 9, 2012, in retribution for the death sentencing of exiled Sunni vice president Tariq Hashemi (tried and convicted in absentia of operating death squads). By March 2013, most of the country's Sunni areas were mired in violence; by the end of the year, some 7,800 civilians had been murdered, and another 18,000 were wounded, making it Iraq's bloodiest year since 2008.²¹ Meanwhile, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Massoud Barzani, implemented a series of measures—e.g., passing a separate budget, separating the region from the national electricity grid, independently exporting oil via Turkey, and intensifying relations with foreign countries—that significantly enhanced

21 "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress," Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR), Washington, D.C., Apr. 30, 2013, pp. 5-6; "Final Report to the United States Congress," SIGIR, Sept. 9, 2013, pp. 66-7; "Civilian Casualties," United Nations, Iraq; "Toby Dodge: Iraq's renewed political violence—Is the country heading back into civil war?" *Manama Voices*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, Manama, Bahrain, Dec. 7, 2013; Zachary Laub and Jonathan Masters, "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria," Council on Foreign Relations, New York, Aug. 8, 2014.

Kurdistan's autonomy and edged it toward statehood.²²

To make matters worse, a number of jihadist groups, notably the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) capitalized on the swelling protest to style themselves as protectors of the oppressed Sunnis. In January 2014, ISIS captured Anbar's capital of Ramadi (though parts of it were subsequently retaken by the government) and the key city of Fallujah where U.S. forces had fought two bitter battles a decade earlier, and five months later, launched a major offensive in northern and western Iraq. On June 9, the group conquered Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, and two days later, captured Tirkat, Saddam Hussein's hometown. By the end of the month, ISIS had established control over many of Iraq's Sunni areas and the Syrian northeastern province of Deir Ezzour; proclaimed a caliphate headed by its leader, Abu Bakr Baghdadi; and changed its name to the Islamic State (IS) to reflect its claim to leadership of the worldwide Muslim community (*umma*).²³

When, in August 2014, U.S. fighter planes bombed IS targets in northern Iraq, the organization responded by posting YouTube videos showing the decapitation of two captured U.S. journalists and a British aid worker. Yet while this ghastly PR exercise enticed further European Muslims into IS's ranks and drove the CIA to concede that the group "mustered between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters across Iraq and Syria" (rather than the 10,000 as previously believed),²⁴ it

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failed to achieve its intended deterrent goal as the international revulsion sparked by the beheadings drove a grudging Obama to de-

clare that "the U.S. is at war with ISIL in the same way the U.S. is at war with al-Qaeda."²⁵

And so it is that four years after triumphantly announcing the end of the Iraq war, the president who had made disengagement from the conflict a key electoral promise and the hallmark of his first term in office found himself sucked again into the Iraqi quagmire. While Obama has thus far managed to avoid deploying U.S. ground forces while somewhat degrading IS's military capabilities (killing some of its top leaders and apparently wounding Baghdadi), the air campaign has neither dimmed the group's appeal to Western Muslims nor prevented it from making substantial gains that further exposed the administration's impotence.

Springtime Delusions

The failure to anticipate the rise of IS was emblematic of the total incomprehension of the administration (and Western governments more generally) of the real nature of the revolutionary tidal wave that has cascaded across the Middle East since December 2010, toppling in rapid succession the long-reigning Tunisian and Egyptian autocrats, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak, and kindling euphoric talk in the West of an "Arab Spring" that would usher in an era of regional democratization.

While Obama claimed that these events "should not have come as a

22 "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress," SIGIR, Oct. 30, 2012, pp. 9, 61.

23 Al-Jazeera (Doha), June 30, 2014; Abdelwahed al-Ansari, "How did 'Islamic State' proclaim caliphate," *al-Monitor* (Washington, D.C.), July 7, 2014; *The Telegraph* (London), July 1, 2014.

24 CNN, Sept. 14, 2014.

25 "Statement by the President on ISIL," OPS, Sept. 10, 2014; *NBC News*, Sept. 12, 2014.

surprise,”²⁶ Washington was totally overwhelmed by their occurrence and reduced from the outset to the role of a hapless spectator. By the time Obama condemned on January 14, 2011, “the use of violence against citizens peacefully voicing their opinion in Tunisia” and urged “all parties to maintain calm and avoid violence”²⁷ the crisis had blown over, and Ben Ali had fled the country.

Obama’s impact on the subsequent Egyptian crisis was not much greater. To be sure, in an abrupt U-turn from established U.S. policy, he prodded Mubarak to step down so as to initiate a “meaningful” and “peaceful” transition process.²⁸ Yet this very public betrayal of one of Washington’s

staunchest regional allies was little more than a quintessential Obama grandstanding aimed at taking credit for events he had not set in motion and over which he had no control. As Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter’s national security advisor and onetime Obama foreign affairs mentor, put it: “The rhetoric is always terribly imperative and categorical: ‘You must do this,’ ‘He must do that,’ ‘This is unacceptable’... [But] he doesn’t strategize. He sermonizes.”²⁹

Sermonizing was very much in evidence in Obama’s May 19, 2011 speech enunciating his vision of the “Arab Spring” where the president had no qualms about telling local leaders how to conduct themselves in the face of the regional turbulence. “The Syrian people have shown their courage in demanding a transition to democracy,” he categorically stated as if the predominantly Islamist rebels had the slightest interest in the idea and as if the Damascus dictator was taking his marching orders from Washington. “President [Bashar al-] Assad now has a choice: He can lead that transition, or get out of the way.”³⁰

In the coming years, Obama was to reiterate this refrain ad nauseam while at the same time doing practically nothing to facilitate its implementation. Time and again, he warned Assad that the use of chemical weapons against the civilian population was a “red line” that could trigger a U.S. military response, only to



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26 “Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa,” OPS, May 19, 2011.

27 “Statement by the President on Events in Tunisia,” OPS, Jan. 14, 2011.

28 “President Obama on Transition in Egypt,” OPS, Feb. 1, 2011.

29 Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama’s Foreign Policy,” *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011, p. 34.

30 “Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa,” OPS, May 19, 2011.

be repeatedly rebuffed.³¹ Even after the regime's gassing to death of more than a thousand of its rebellious subjects forced Obama grudgingly to announce his intention to launch a punitive air strike, he went out of his way to clarify that "this would not be an open-ended intervention" and "would not [involve] boots on the ground."³² While Assad's acceptance of a Russian proposal for the dismantling of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal allowed Obama to call off the strike while claiming victory, the incident not only ensured the survival of the Syrian regime (and much of its chemical arsenal) but gave it a *carte blanche* to continue slaughtering its citizens provided this was done with conventional, not chemical, weapons. Indeed, with U.S.-Soviet relations ebbing sharply over the 2014 Ukraine crisis, and IS becoming the foremost international scourge after its public execution of Western hostages, the ongoing Syrian bloodbath has fallen off the Western radar allowing Assad to resume chemical attacks on its subjects with impunity.³³ By way of adding insult to injury, at a time when the astounded U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee was told that the \$500 million effort to raise Syrian forces to fight the Islamic State had resulted in the training of "four or five" fighters,³⁴ newly deployed Russian forces in Syria began an air campaign against alleged IS targets as part of a coordinated effort with Damascus,

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Tehran, and Baghdad to defeat the jihadist organization.³⁵

In a desperate bid to salvage whatever was left of his credibility, in

late October 2015 Obama announced the dispatch of up to fifty special operations soldiers to Syria while stressing that they would not be put "on the front lines fighting firefights with ISIL" but would rather "train, advise, and assist" anti-ISIL forces.³⁶

Even the Libyan intervention—the first and only military attempt by the Western powers to sway the "Arab Spring" in their idyllic vision—exposed the glaring dissonance between Obama's "imperative and categorical" rhetoric and its timid implementation as the president left it to Paris and London to orchestrate the international intervention on behalf of the fledgling uprising with Washington reduced to "leading from behind." While the intervention overthrew Libya's long reigning dictator Mu'ammarr al-Qaddafi—albeit at a far greater effort and cost than expected—the nascent "new Libya" has been a far cry from the showcase, Western-propped, democratized society it was supposed to become. Instead, the collapse of the Qaddafi regime, which had skillfully kept the country's disparate components intact for forty-two years, gave rise to general anarchy with a multitude of mainly Islamist militias, notably IS, controlling various parts of the country and vying for power with the central government as waves of refugees seek to flee the country en route to Europe.³⁷

Reluctant to concede that the regional upheavals had never been the liberal

31 "Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps," OPS, Aug. 20, 2012.

32 "Statement by the President on Syria," OPS, Aug. 31, 2013.

33 Brig. Gen. Itai Baron, outgoing head of the IDF's intelligence research department, interview, *Israel Hayom* (Tel Aviv), Jan. 15, 2015.

34 *The Guardian*, Sept. 16, 2015.

35 Al-Jazeera, Sept. 27, 2015; CNN, Oct. 1, 2015.

36 "[Obama: No U.S. troops on Syria front lines](#)," Al-Jazeera, Nov. 3, 2015.

37 See Yehudit Ronen, "Libya Descends into Chaos," *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2016.

awakening they were taken for, Western leaders and observers massively downplayed the significance of the Islamist surge they unleashed: denying its very occurrence (as with the U.S. administration's astounding characterization of the Muslim Brotherhood as "largely secular,"³⁸ which perhaps helps explain its warm embrace of their short-lived rule in Egypt); attributing it to the Islamists' organizational superiority and the secularists' failure to provide compelling alternatives; or predicting the Islamists' inevitable moderation due to their newly-assumed governing responsibilities.³⁹

In his May 2011 speech, Obama portrayed the "Arab Spring" as a regional antithesis to Islamism in general and to the militant brand offered by Osama bin Laden and his ilk in particular. "Bin Laden and his murderous vision won some adherents," he argued. "But even before his death, al-Qaeda was losing its struggle for relevance, as the overwhelming majority of people saw that the slaughter of innocents did not answer their cries for a better life."⁴⁰ Small wonder that when a year later, al-Qaeda affiliates attacked the U.S. consulate in the Libyan city of Benghazi on the eleventh anniversary of 9/11, killing Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans, the administration responded with customary obfuscation. Ignoring both the

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attack's deliberate timing and a Libyan forewarning of its imminence,⁴¹ U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Susan Rice described the incident as a spontaneous

retort to a U.S.-made, anti-Muslim video clip that spun out of control while White House press secretary Jay Carney argued that "we don't have and did not have concrete evidence to suggest that [the attack] was not in reaction to the film." Obama tacitly amplified this misrepresentation a day after the attack: "We reject all efforts to denigrate the religious beliefs of others. But there is absolutely no justification to this type of senseless violence." Becoming more explicit in a U.N. address two weeks later, he said, "I have made it clear that the United States government had nothing to do with this video ... [Yet] there is no video justifying an attack on an Embassy."⁴²

This was of course a deliberate misrepresentation. As early as the night of the attack, then-secretary of state Hillary Clinton emailed her daughter that "two of our officers were killed in Benghazi by an al-Qaeda like group." In an email to the Egyptian prime minister the next day, Clinton was far more forthright, saying that "we know the attack in Libya had nothing to do with the film. It was a planned attack, not a protest."⁴³

But whatever the administration was prepared to concede in private, it would not

38 *ABC News*, Feb. 10, 2011.

39 See, for example, "Democratic Transition in the Middle East: Between Authoritarianism and Islamism," National Endowment for Democracy, Washington, D.C., July 12, 2012; Samuel Tadros, "Egypt's Elections: Why the Islamists Won," *World Affairs Journal*, Mar./Apr. 2012; Marc Lynch, "Islamists in a Changing Middle East," *Foreign Policy*, July 8, 2012; Gregory Gause, III, "The Year the Arab Spring Went Bad," *Foreign Policy*, Dec. 31, 2012.

40 "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa," OPS, May 19, 2011.

41 *The Independent* (London), Sept. 18, 2012.

42 *Face the Nation*, CBS, Sept. 16, 2012; "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney 9/18/2012," OPS; *Fox News*, Sept. 21, 2012; "President Obama on Death of U.S. Embassy Staff in Libya," U.S. Department of State, Sept. 12, 2012; "Transcript: President Obama Talks to the U.N. about Mideast Peace, Iran," *ABC News*, Sept. 25, 2012.

43 "[These 3 Emails Show What Hillary Was Really Saying about Benghazi](#)," *Fox News Insider*, Oct. 23, 2015.

acknowledge in public even if this meant lying to the American people (and the world at large). After all, was not al-Qaeda supposed to have faded into oblivion after the killing of its founding leader?

Exacerbating the Arab-Israeli Conflict

No less disastrous has been Obama's handling of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By the time he took office in January 2009, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had been engaged in fifteen years of negotiations in the framework of the Oslo "peace" process. Within months of his inauguration, the Palestinian leadership, buoyed by his sustained pressure on Jerusalem, dropped all pretenses of seeking a negotiated settlement and opted for an international imposition of Palestinian statehood without a peace agreement with Israel.

When, in June 2009, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu broke with Likud's ideological precept and agreed to the establishment of a Palestinian state provided it recognized Israel's Jewish identity (as required by the November 1947 U.N. partition resolution, which the PLO had professed to accept in 1988), Washington did nothing to disabuse the Palestinian leadership of its decades-long rejection of Jewish statehood—the root cause of the Arab-Israeli conflict—and instead pressured the Israeli government for a complete freeze of building activities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. This culminated in an Israeli announcement on November 24, 2009, of a ten-month construction freeze aimed at launching "meaningful negotiations to reach



In open rebuff of Jerusalem and Washington, Mahmoud Abbas, above, and the Palestinian leadership sought an international imposition of Palestinian statehood without a peace agreement with Israel. In November 2012, Abbas obtained General Assembly recognition of Palestine as a "non-member observer state" to the undisguised dismay of the U.S. administration.

a historic peace agreement that would finally end the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians."⁴⁴

Nothing of the sort happened. Watching the deepening schism in U.S.-Israeli relations with undisguised glee in anticipation of substantial—and unreciprocated—concessions, the Palestinian leadership dismissed Netanyahu's acceptance of the two-state solution out of hand. Chief peace negotiator Saeb Erekat warned that the prime minister "will have to wait 1,000 years before he finds one Palestinian who will go along with him" while Fatah, the PLO's largest constituent organization and Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas's alma mater, reaffirmed its longstanding commitment to the "armed struggle" (the standard euphemism for violence and terrorism) as "a strategy, not tactic ... in the battle for liberation and for the elimination of the Zionist presence. This

44 *Haaretz*, Nov. 25, 2009.

struggle will not stop until the Zionist entity is eliminated, and Palestine is liberated.”⁴⁵

Nor did Abbas have any qualms about walking away from the negotiations table upon the expiry of the construction freeze in September 2010 in defiance of Obama’s buoyant prediction earlier that month that peace could be achieved within a year. Asked by Netanyahu to reconsider, in return for a renewed settlement freeze and recognition of Israel as a national home for the Jewish people, the PA president reiterated his rejection to ever sign “an agreement recognizing a Jewish state” and threatened a unilateral declaration of statehood were the peace process to remain stalled.⁴⁶

Abbas made good on his threat in September 2011 when, in open rebuff of Jerusalem and Washington and in flagrant violation of the Oslo accords that envisaged the attainment of peace through direct negotiations between the two parties, he sought to present Israel with a *fait accompli* by gaining U.N. recognition of Palestinian statehood. Having failed to garner sufficient support at the Security Council, in November 2012, Abbas obtained a General Assembly recognition of Palestine as a “non-member observer state” to the undisguised dismay of the U.S. administration, which condemned the move as “counterproductive” and an obstacle “in the path [to] peace.”⁴⁷

The stark warning by Secretary of State John Kerry that “the window for a two-state solution is shutting” made no impression

Obama’s persistent snub of Washington’s longest and most loyal Middle East ally bought him the distrust of most Israelis.

on the Palestinians.⁴⁸ To be sure, in apparent deference to Kerry’s tireless efforts to jumpstart the stalemated talks, the Palestinians agreed to return to the

negotiating table at the end of July 2013. Yet, this was a transparent ploy to drive a wedge between Israel and the U.S. administration, which seemed to have recognized the futility of its first term strategy and adopted a seemingly more conciliatory tone toward Jerusalem. The Palestinians also hoped to lay the groundwork for a renewed unilateral drive for U.N. recognition of Palestinian statehood.

This strategy bore the desired fruit before too long. At the end of April 2014, Abbas walked out of the talks yet again, having rallied the Arab League behind his “absolute and decisive rejection to recognizing Israel as a Jewish state,” and formed a “unity government” with Hamas. The U.S. administration blamed Israel for the debacle while the EU indicated the possible boycott of Israeli entities that operated beyond the 1967 lines.⁴⁹ Three months later, when Israel was grudgingly drawn into a third war with Hamas in five years, the U.S. administration collaborated with Hamas’s foremost patrons—Turkey and Qatar—in an attempt to organize a ceasefire amenable to the Islamist terror group; endorsed the suspension of U.S. flights to Israel thus triggering an avalanche of suspensions that left the Jewish state briefly cut off from the rest of the world; and withheld certain weapons supplies in an attempt to rein in Israel’s military operations.

45 *Independent Online*, June 14, 2009; “Fatah’s Sixth General Conference Resolutions: Pursuing Peace Options without Relinquishing Resistance or Right to Armed Struggle,” MEMRI, Aug. 13, 2009.

46 *The Jerusalem Post*, Nov. 10, Dec. 10, 2010.

47 *CBS News*, Nov. 30, 2012.

48 Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA, New York), Apr. 18, 2013.

49 *Haaretz*, Mar. 26, 2014; *The Times of Israel* (Jerusalem), Apr. 8, 2014; Ben Birnbaum and Amir Tibon, “The Explosive, Inside Story of How John Kerry Built an Israel-Palestine Peace Plan—and Watched It Crumble,” *The New Republic*, July 20, 2014.

When, in October 2015, a tidal wave of Palestinian terrorism swept across Israel, Kerry ascribed the eruption to the (non-existent) “massive increase in settlements over the course of the last years” (in fact, by Netanyahu’s own admission, his government has built less in West Bank neighborhoods than its immediate precursors) while a State Department spokesman attributed it to Israel’s (imaginary) disruption of the status quo on Temple Mount, accusing the Netanyahu government of using “excessive force” to curb Palestinian attacks.⁵⁰

“The thing about Bibi is, he’s a chickenshit,” an anonymous senior White House official lambasted the Israeli prime minister. “[H]e won’t do anything to reach an accommodation with the Palestinians or with the Sunni Arab states. The only thing he’s interested in is protecting himself from political defeat. He’s not [Yitzhak] Rabin; he’s not [Ariel] Sharon; he’s certainly no [Menachem] Begin. He’s got no guts.”⁵¹

Appeasement of one’s enemies at the expense of friends whose loyalty can be taken for granted is a common—if unsavory—human trait, and Obama is no exception to this rule. His persistent snub of Washington’s longest and most loyal Middle Eastern ally bought him the distrust of most Israelis: At the end of the 2014 Gaza war, only 4 percent of them found the president more pro-Israel than pro-Palestinian, compared to 31 percent upon his 2008

election.⁵² However, his tireless pandering to the Palestinians (“You will never have an administration as committed ... as this one” he told Abbas⁵³) also failed to buy him their sympathy and appreciation. On the eve of the 2012 U.S. elections, a mere 9 percent of Palestinians viewed his reelection favorably, and nearly four times as many thought it would have adverse implications. And as if to add insult to injury, a comprehensive 2013 survey found Palestinians more hostile to America than any other national group with 76 percent considering it an enemy (compared to one percent of Israelis) and only 4 percent viewing it as a partner.⁵⁴

Conclusion

As world attention focuses on the latest spate of Middle East fiascos—from the migrant hordes swamping Europe, to Russia’s Syria intervention, to the latest flare-up of Palestinian terrorism—for which the U.S. administration is partly culpable, the Iran nuclear deal will undoubtedly remain Obama’s foremost foreign policy folly. For the real issue is not whether the JCPOA irrevocably blocks Tehran’s road to the bomb (which it does not), or whether the administration could have attained a better deal (which it could), or even whether no agreement is better than a bad agreement (as initially argued by Obama) or an assured recipe to war (as he later claimed). Rather the

⁵⁰ “Conversation with Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government Director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs Professor Graham Allison,” Secretary of State John Kerry, Charles Hotel, Cambridge, Mass., U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C., Oct. 13, 2015; [“John Kirby Spokesperson, Daily Press Briefing,”](#) U.S. Department of State, Oct. 7, 2015; [“PM: I have built less in settlements than Olmert, Barak, Sharon,”](#) *Ynet news.com*, Oct. 20, 2015.

⁵¹ *USA Today*, July 25, 2014; *The Washington Post*, Aug. 23, 2014; Goldberg, “The Crisis in U.S.-Israel Relations.”

⁵² *The Jerusalem Post*, Oct. 30, 2014.

⁵³ Birnbaum and Tibon, “How John Kerry Built an Israel-Palestine Peace Plan.”

⁵⁴ “Palestinian Public opinion poll no. 45,” Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Ramallah, Sept. 13-15, 2012; “America’s Global Image Remains More Positive than China’s. Chapter 1: Attitudes toward the United States,” Pew Research Center, May 18, 2013; “Global Opposition to U.S. Surveillance and Drones, but Limited Harm to America’s Image,” Pew Research Center, May 14, 2014.

question is whether an agreement with a murderous, messianic, Islamist tyranny, reigning over one of the Middle East's most powerful nations and committed to the world-conquering agenda of its founding father, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini,⁵⁵ should have been sought in the first place.

In a similar way, when seventy-seven years ago British prime minister Neville Chamberlain was about to leave for the German city of Munich to negotiate the agreement that would shortly trigger the worst war in human history, the London *Times* lauded the move as “water in the wilderness” that would “bring a sense of relief and profound satisfaction to all but the very few for whom any sort of intercourse with a dictator is incomprehensible and anathema.”⁵⁶

The problem with this analysis is, of course, that Hitler was no ordinary dictator, who could be bought at the right price, but a maniacal tyrant in control of one of the world's most powerful nations and bent on world domination. Yet while the full extent of Hitler's ambition was rarely recognized at the time, no such vagueness exists with regard to the Islamist regime in Tehran, which in its thirty-six years at the helm has consistently subverted its neighbors, triggered the longest and bloodiest war in the Middle East's modern history (with Iraq,

1980-88), transformed Iran into the world's foremost sponsor of terrorism, and poured billions of dollars into its nuclear weapons program at the expense of the economic wellbeing of ordinary Iranians and at the cost of sustained international isolation.

Hence, while Chamberlain could genuinely believe that the agreement he signed brought “peace for our time,”⁵⁷ Obama has been kicking the nuclear can down the road in the clear knowledge that the JCPOA is at best a delay mechanism in the mullahs' steady drive to the bomb. As he admitted in an uncharacteristic moment of candor, “in year 13, 14, 15, they have advanced centrifuges that enrich uranium fairly rapidly, and at that point, the breakout times [to nuclear weapons] would have shrunk almost down to zero.”⁵⁸

At a time when the international community trembles at the infinitely lesser threat of the Islamic State, the implications of this inevitable scenario are too horrendous to contemplate.

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55 As Khomeini put it in his day: “The Iranian revolution is not exclusively that of Iran, because Islam does not belong to any particular people ... We will export our revolution throughout the world because it is an Islamic revolution. The struggle will continue until the calls ‘there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah’ are echoed all over the world.” Farhad Rajaei, *Islamic Values and World View: Khomeini on Man, the State and International Politics* (Lanham: University of America Press, 1983), pp. 82-3.

56 “A Bold Initiative,” *The Times*, Sept. 15, 1938.

57 “Ovation in London,” *ibid.*, Oct. 1, 1938.

58 “[Transcript: President Obama's Full Interview on Iran Nuclear Deal.](#)” National Public Radio, Apr. 7, 2015.