

Biden Must Not Reprise Obama's Middle East Policy

by Eric James Bordenkircher

The Democratic president-elect Joe Biden used his experiences, connections, and close relationship with former President Barack Obama to tap into the nostalgia for the Obama era while on the campaign trail. Biden's rhetoric and the people who surround him, many of whom were prominent Obama administration officials,¹ raise questions about how much his foreign policy will resemble that of the Obama presidency, especially with regard to the Middle East. But what did Obama hope to accomplish in the region? What did he actually accomplish? And would repetition of these policies be a prudent course of action?



Within months of his election, President Obama traveled to Cairo to give an unprecedented speech to the Arab-Muslim world. He spoke of resetting relations with the Middle East and working in partnership. But, the new beginning never occurred.

Obama's Message for the Middle East

During his 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama presented himself as the antithesis of President George W. Bush and

¹ [“Meet Joe Biden’s foreign policy advisers.”](#) *Al-Monitor*, Apr. 20, 2020.

the Republican presidential nominee John McCain in matters of foreign policy. Using Bush's controversial decision to invade Iraq as the touchstone for his foreign policy platform, the senator from Illinois frequently reminded voters of his initial opposition to the move, blaming the war for weakening Washington's military prowess, draining its finances, and diverting its attention from more critical national security issues. In Obama's account, the invasion represented the foreign policy establishment's proclivity for unilateralism and preference for solutions that needed to be replaced with a more "internationalist" vision. This shift would allow the U.S. to keep leading the world through reliance on effective partnerships, multilateralism, international institutions, and a variety of diplomatic tools (e.g., the ability to exert political and economic pressure).² Military solutions were a means of last resort to buttress diplomacy and/or to counter existential or imminent threats.

Obama envisioned a "tough, smart and principled national security strategy."³ It was risk averse, intolerant of "free-riders," distrustful of the commitment and motivations of long-time friends, and immune to the mindset of the foreign policy establishment. He believed that U.S. foreign policy must be driven and defined by a common good and internationally recognized norms that would produce global stability.

These themes and ideas resonated in Obama's Middle East rhetoric on the campaign trail and in his presidential speeches in

For Obama, the foreign policy establishment's proclivity for unilateralism needed to be replaced with an "internationalist" vision.

Ankara and Cairo in 2009. Foremost was the need for an immediate and responsible troop withdrawal from Iraq since not only was there no military solution to the country's many prob-

lems, but the continued military presence prevented Iraq's warring factions from taking responsibility and arriving at a political solution. Only a U.S. troop withdrawal coupled with an international diplomatic initiative to address the Iraqi malaise could benefit Iraq, the region, and the United States.⁴ Instead of Iraq, the presidential candidate offered to focus on issues he considered more critical to U.S. national security by campaigning on a troop surge in Afghanistan to defeat al-Qaeda and the Taliban, stating: "This is a war we have to win."⁵

In contrast to the Bush administration, Obama envisaged winning the war not mainly by military means but by renewing partnerships, rebuilding institutions, strengthening alliances, and utilizing diplomacy. In Afghanistan, he wanted more contributions from NATO members; in Iran, he advocated multilateral diplomacy and a mixture of sticks and carrots to incentivize (rather than coerce) the Islamist regime to abandon its nuclear weapons program. In his Cairo speech, Obama spoke of resetting relations with the Middle East and working in partnership: "There must be a sustained effort to listen to each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground."⁶

² Barack Obama, "[Renewing American Leadership](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, July/Aug. 2007.

³ "[Text: Obama's Remarks on Iraq and Afghanistan](#)," *The New York Times*, July 15, 2008.

⁴ [Ibid.](#)

⁵ [Ibid.](#)

⁶ "[Remarks by the President at Cairo University, 6-04-09](#)," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Washington, D.C.

Through this dialogue and mutual engagement, Obama believed Washington and Middle East societies could encounter threats together and recognize their shared common humanity. Obama's election was met with excitement and anticipation in the Middle East. He was the son of a Muslim father, and he had spent part of his childhood in the most populated Muslim country, Indonesia. Within months of his election, he traveled to Cairo to give what many considered to be an unprecedented speech to the Arab-Muslim world. Would he be able to make good on his hyped goal of resetting U.S. relations with the Middle East and the Islamic world?

No, the new beginning touted in the Cairo speech never occurred. And the passage of time has been increasingly unkind to Obama and his policies in the Middle East, which left the region and U.S. relations with the local parties worse off than what he inherited from his predecessor.

The Iraq Troop Withdrawal

Obama fulfilled his campaign promise and brought U.S. troops home by December 2011. It was not a difficult decision as the withdrawal had already been negotiated and a timeline established by the Bush administration.⁷

Yet controversy surrounds Obama's inability or unwillingness to extend the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) beyond



U.S. soldiers line up at a base in Iraq, October 26, 2011. The U.S. troop withdrawal precipitated the implosion of the Iraqi army, the intensification of sectarian tensions, and stagnation of Iraqi state institutional development, and contributed to the rise of ISIS.

2011. Negotiated by the Bush administration with the Iraqi government, the agreement enabled some 20,000-25,000 U.S. troops to remain in Iraq with immunity from Iraqi law while training the local army and assisting in counterterrorism operations. But since in 2011 only Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki, not the parliament, promised immunity, Obama chose to end SOFA and seemed to have lost interest in Iraq after the withdrawal. He turned a blind eye to Maliki's exclusion and persecution of the Sunni minority in blatant disregard of his demand for an inclusive Iraqi government, and he proposed a significant cut in funding for peacebuilding, human rights, and civil society in the country.

The U.S. troop withdrawal precipitated the immediate implosion of the Iraqi army, the intensification of sectarian tensions, the proliferation of corruption, and the stagnation of state institutional development, which greatly contributed to the advent of the Islamic State (ISIS) and its takeover of large

⁷ Missy Ryan, "[Who made the decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq?](#)" *The Washington Post*, Sept. 26, 2016.

swathes of Iraqi territory.⁸ These events enabled Tehran to deepen its meddling in Iraqi domestic affairs by creating proxy militias, largely under the umbrella organization known as the Popular Mobilization Forces, which allowed it to tighten its control over the Iraqi political system. According to analyst Peter Beinart:

The decline of U.S. leverage in Iraq simply reinforced the attitude Obama had held since 2009: Let Maliki do whatever he wants so long as he keeps Iraq off the front page. ... While far less egregious than George W. Bush's errors, Obama's have been egregious enough. By ignoring Iraq, and refusing to defend democratic principles there, he has helped spawn the disaster we see today.⁹

Afghanistan

Troop deployment to Afghanistan under Obama reached the level of 100,000 and was maintained into 2011.¹⁰ In 2010, Obama also requested \$20 billion for Afghan reconstruction—a 38 percent increase over the \$51.5 billion appropriated to Afghanistan since 2002—with \$14.2 billion of this sum

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dedicated to building up the Afghan National Security Forces.¹¹

By the end of Obama's second term, however, the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan had been reduced to 8,400.¹² On the face of it, this reduction was a vindication of Obama's 2008 pledge to win the war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban,¹³ especially in view of the May 2011 killing of Osama bin Laden. In fact, it revealed the inability of the Obama administration to develop an effective strategic partnership with the Kabul government.¹⁴ As a report by the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction put it in October 2016:

Afghan army and police numbers remain below authorized-strength goals; (2) the security forces suffer from high levels of attrition; (3) the United States lacks visibility into most Afghan units' actual levels of training and effectiveness; (4) the security forces have questionable abilities to sustain and maintain units and materiel; and (5) the security forces continue to deploy commando and other highly skilled units on missions that

⁸ James Jeffrey, "[Behind the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq.](#)" *The Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 2, 2014; Ryan N. Manniana, "[How the 2011 US Troop Withdrawal from Iraq led to the rise of ISIS.](#)" *Small Wars Journal*, Dec. 23, 2018.

⁹ Peter Beinart, "[Obama's disastrous Iraq policy: An autopsy.](#)" *The Atlantic*, June 23, 2014.

¹⁰ Danielle Kurtzleben, "[CHART: How the U.S. Troop Levels in Afghanistan Have Changed under Obama.](#)" *NPR*, July 6, 2016.

¹¹ "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress," The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), Arlington, Va., [Apr. 30, 2010](#), p. iii.

¹² Kurtzleben, "[CHART: How the U.S. Troop Levels in Afghanistan Have Changed under Obama.](#)"

¹³ "[Text: Obama's Remarks on Iraq and Afghanistan.](#)"

¹⁴ Mark Landler, "[The Afghan War and the Evolution of Obama.](#)" *The New York Times*, Jan. 1, 2017.

should be undertaken by regular units.¹⁵

To make matters worse, the Taliban remained in control of large swaths of territory while al-Qaeda, despite the loss of its founding leader, maintained a presence and was competing with ISIS for followers in Afghanistan.

Iran's Nuclear Program

There is little doubt that the July 2015 Iran nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), is viewed by Obama admirers as his foremost foreign policy achievement and a major pillar of his presidential legacy.¹⁶ It is promoted as proof of the effectiveness of multilateralism in general and of international diplomacy and dialogue in particular. By rallying the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and Germany (P5+1) behind the agreement, it was argued, Obama persuaded Tehran to trust the goodwill of the international community and to subject its nuclear program to strict supervision so as to assure the world of its peaceful purposes.

Though widely considered “the center of the arc” of the Obama administration (according to Ben Rhodes, the president’s deputy national security adviser for strategic communications),¹⁷ the JCPOA was never

The administration’s well-orchestrated media blitz covered up the JCPOA’s deeply flawed and dangerous nature.

ratified by the U.S. Congress and remained an executive order for the remainder of Obama’s presidency. Moreover, the administration’s well-orchestrated media blitz,

which manipulated ill-informed and inexperienced journalists into creating an “echo chamber” to help sell the deal to the public,¹⁸ covered up the deal’s deeply flawed and dangerous nature. “Obama leaves the Middle East a far more dangerous place than it was eight years ago,” wrote nuclear weapons proliferation expert Emily Landau:

Not merely because the JCPOA opens the door to the terrifying prospect of a nuclear Iran within ten to fifteen years and perhaps even sooner but because the administration enabled an emboldened Iran to emerge over the course of 2015-16, un-challenged by Washington. In fact, while negotiating the deal, the U.S. president was already helping to transform the Islamic Republic, with its extremist, hegemonic agenda, into the region’s pre-eminent power at the expense of traditional U.S. allies.¹⁹

Even Obama admitted that he had just kicked the nuclear can down the road and that “in year 13, 14, 15, they [the Iranians] 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.”²⁰

¹⁵ “Quarterly Report to the United States Congress,” The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), Arlington, Va., [Oct. 30, 2016](#), p. 1.

¹⁶ Emily B. Landau, “[Obama’s Legacy: A Nuclear Iran?](#)” *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2017.

¹⁷ David Samuels, “[The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama’s Foreign Policy Guru.](#)” *The New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2016.

¹⁸ [Ibid.](#)

¹⁹ Landau, “[Obama’s Legacy: A Nuclear Iran?](#)”

²⁰ Efraim Karsh, “[Obama’s Middle East Delusions.](#)” *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2016.

Small wonder that Washington's relations with its traditional regional allies, notably Saudi Arabia, the Gulf monarchies, Egypt, and Israel deteriorated over this issue, with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu taking the unprecedented move of addressing both houses of Congress in a last ditch attempt to block the Iran nuclear deal.²¹

Egypt

The Obama administration abandoned President Hosni Mubarak within days of the outbreak of mass protests in Egypt in late January 2011. Mubarak, a 30-years-long close U.S. ally, supporter of the U.S.-led war on terror, keeper of the peace with Israel, and collaborator on issues related to Iran, among other things, might have not stood a chance of surviving the tidal wave of protest. Yet his betrayal in his direst moment kindled doubts among Washington's regional allies regarding the administration's reliability (see the following section on Saudi Arabia), not least since Mubarak's downfall led to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, a militant Islamist group that had long sought to subvert the ruling Arab regimes as a steppingstone to a worldwide expansion "until the entire world will chant the name of the Prophet [Muhammad], Allah's blessings and prayers be upon him" (to use the words of the organization's founder Hassan Banna).²²



President Obama meets with Egypt's president Hosni Mubarak, Cairo, June 4, 2009. The U.S. administration abandoned Mubarak, a 30-year ally, following mass protests in Egypt in 2011. Mubarak's betrayal kindled doubts among Washington's regional allies regarding the administration's reliability.

Yet Obama's concern for human rights, which had allegedly informed his decision to abandon Mubarak (ominously echoing President Carter's betrayal of the Iranian shah three decades earlier), patently failed. Both the Muslim Brotherhood's short-lived rule and its successor government headed by Field Marshall Abdel Fattah Sisi were and are authoritarian regimes that make Mubarak look soft on human rights.²³ Obama made some attempts to curb Sisi's authoritarianism by withholding arms deliveries and threatening reassessment of Washington's military

²¹ "[Netanyahu's address to Congress](#)," *The Washington Post*, Mar. 3, 2015.

²² Efraim Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 208.

²³ Chad Nelson, "The evolution of norms: American policy toward revolution in Iran and Egypt," *Journal of Human Rights*, 4 (2017): 504-8.

aid to Egypt. But he quickly relented when the Egyptian president defiantly warmed relations with Russia, Egypt's longstanding patron until its drift to the U.S. orbit in the 1970s.²⁴

Saudi Arabia

Obama's betrayal of Mubarak was viewed with considerable alarm in Riyadh. For while the U.S.-Saudi alliance dates back to World War II, the Saudis feared that if another longstanding U.S. ally could be ditched on the flimsiest of pretexts, so could they. These fears were further exacerbated by Obama's willingness to engage the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood regime in Cairo (and Islamist groups more generally) while denying and whitewashing their violent and expansionist agenda, at times even their Islamist nature—as with the mindboggling definition of the Muslim Brotherhood as “largely secular” by the director of National Intelligence, James Clapper.²⁵

To make matters worse, the Saudis were slighted by Obama's dismissive view of the U.S.-Saudi alliance and felt threatened by his relentless pursuit of a nuclear deal with Iran, which they believed was bound to come at their expense. Indeed, Obama readily conceded to an enquiring journalist that he was “less likely than previous presidents to axiomatically side with Saudi Arabia in its

dispute with its archrival, Iran.”²⁶ The Saudis viewed Tehran's hegemonic ambitions in general, and its dogged pursuit of nuclear weapons in particular, as an existential threat and were horrified that rather than attempt to curb Tehran's aggressiveness, Obama sought to lure it through gestures and concessions. They rejected his suggestion that they “find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace” with Tehran,²⁷ and bitterly opposed the JCPOA. The president's proposed sweetener of increased arms supplies and support for Riyadh's Yemen intervention, where it fought Tehran's proxy Houthi militia,²⁸ failed to impress the Saudis, who intensified their covert military and intelligence cooperation with Israel, another traditional U.S. ally snubbed by Obama. The Saudi disdain for Obama was vividly illustrated by the warm welcome given in May 2017 to President Donald Trump, who had promised during his election campaign to remove the United States from the JCPOA and who pointedly made Riyadh his first presidential foreign port of call.

Israel

Relations with Israel started to deteriorate almost from the moment Obama entered office because the president believed that the longstanding “special relationship” between the two states had been counter-productive to U.S. national interests. He told a group of prominent Jewish-American leaders,

²⁴ Jonathan Marcus, “[Sisi in Russia: Moscow's Egyptian gambit](#),” *BBC News*, Feb. 13, 2014; Mark Thompson, “[U.S. Resumes Weapons Flow to Egypt](#),” *Time*, Mar. 31, 2015.

²⁵ “Director of National Intelligence James Clapper: Muslim Brotherhood ‘Largely Secular,’” *ABC News*, Feb. 10, 2011.

²⁶ Jeffrey Goldberg, “[The Obama Doctrine](#),” *The Atlantic*, Apr. 2016.

²⁷ [Ibid.](#)

²⁸ Reuters, [Sept. 7, 2016](#).

Look at the past eight years ... During those eight years, there was no space between us and Israel, and what did we get from that? When there is no daylight, Israel just sits on the sidelines, and that erodes our credibility with the Arab states.²⁹

In line with this thinking, Israel was conspicuously dropped from Obama's foreign travel itinerary with the president making his first official visit to the Jewish state only in March 2013—two months into his second term.³⁰ Netanyahu's efforts to revive the peace negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) by accepting the two-state solution and imposing a ten-month freeze on West Bank construction activities failed to sway Obama who continued to push for further concessions, often using international developments (e.g., the May 2010 Gaza flotilla incident) to increase the pressure on Israel. This, however, backfired, as the Palestinian leadership walked away from the negotiating table after the expiry of the construction freeze. They never returned to negotiations, despite strenuous efforts by Obama and his second-term secretary of state John Kerry.

Nor did Netanyahu's spirited efforts to prevent an Iran nuclear deal endear him to



Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu addresses Congress, March 3, 2015. Though Netanyahu's efforts to block the Iran nuclear deal did not endear him to Obama, neither did the administration's anti-Israel policies elicit Palestinian sympathy and appreciation.

the U.S. president. "The thing about Bibi is, he's a chickenshit," an anonymous senior White House official told *The Atlantic* editor-in-chief Jeffrey Goldberg, gloating how the administration's pressure and Netanyahu's timidity had prevented an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear facilities in 2011. "Over the years, Obama administration officials have described Netanyahu to me as recalcitrant, myopic, reactionary, obtuse, blustering, pompous, and 'Aspergery,'" wrote Goldberg, revealing the extent of the administration's hostility to the Israeli prime minister. "But I had not previously heard Netanyahu described as a 'chickenshit.'" ³¹

²⁹ Scott Wilson, "[Obama Searches for Middle East Peace](#)," *The Washington Post*, July 14, 2012.

³⁰ Michael Martinez, "[5 things to know about Obama's first presidential visit to Israel](#)," CNN, Mar. 23, 2013.

³¹ Jeffrey Goldberg, "[The Crisis in U.S.-Israel Relations Is Officially Here](#)," *The Atlantic*, Oct. 28, 2014.

Obama's sweetener to Israel was similar to that offered to Riyadh: a \$38 billion military aid package over the next decade—the largest in U.S. aid history to Israel.³² And as with the Saudis, this failed to overshadow the administration's overall anti-Israel dis-position, from withholding critical military items during Israel's summer 2014 war with Hamas³³ to refraining from vetoing a particularly hostile Security Council resolution concerning Israel's settlement activity in the West Bank (and East Jerusalem) a month before the president's departure from the White House.³⁴ Ironically, Obama's anti-Israel policies failed to buy him the desired Palestinian sympathy and appreciation: On the eve of the 2012 U.S. elections, just 9 percent of Palestinians viewed his reelection favorably, and nearly four times as many thought it would have adverse implications.³⁵

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North Africa and southern Europe in the coming decade. The huge power vacuum created by Muammar Qaddafi's overthrow triggered an ongoing civil war in Libya, extensive inter-

vention by external actors, proliferation of extremist Islamist groups (notably ISIS and al-Qaeda), fears of ethnic cleansing, massive human rights abuses, waves of illegal migrants to Europe, and reports of the reinstatement of slavery. So, when al-Qaeda affiliates commemorated 9/11 by attacking the U.S. consulate in Benghazi on September 11, 2012, killing Amb. J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans, it was no surprise that the administration went out of its way to cover up the extent of Libyan chaos by misrepresenting the attack as spontaneous revenge for a U.S.-made, anti-Muslim video clip circulating at that time.³⁶

Libya Intervention

The decision to take part in the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya echoed the Iraq invasion in that it effectively strove to achieve wider goals than those defined in its rather limited original mission and had no preconceived plan for the postwar situation. As a result, it was a spectacular failure whose adverse repercussions reverberated throughout

Syria

Reeling from the Libyan debacle, Obama resisted calls for military intervention in Syria, which was plunged into a vicious civil war in 2011; instead, he limited himself to repeated calls to President Bashar Assad to step down. Matters got to a head in August 2013 when the regime's gassing to death of some 1,400 of its citizens forced Obama, who had declared the use of chemical weapons a "red line" that would trigger U.S. retribution, to announce his intention to

³² Reuters, [Sept. 14, 2016](#).

³³ *The Times of Israel* (Jerusalem), [Aug. 14, 2014](#).

³⁴ "[Resolution 2334 \(2016\) Adopted by the Security Council at its 7853rd meeting, on 23 December 2016](#)," U.N. Security Council, New York.

³⁵ Karsh, "[Obama's Middle East Delusions](#)."

³⁶ "Libyan Pres. Magariaf, Amb. Rice, and Sen. McCain," *Face the Nation*, [CBS, Sept. 16, 2012](#); *Fox News*, [Sept. 21, 2012](#).

launch a punitive air strike. But he backed down shortly afterward and claimed victory as the Russians forced Assad to agree to surrender his chemical weapons to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. In fact, the incident ensured the survival of the regime and gave it a carte blanche to continue killing its citizens by conventional weapons. In addition, Assad managed to keep a significant part of his chemical arsenal with reported chemical attacks on civilian populations continuing until the end of the Obama presidency (and beyond), further denting Obama's credibility.³⁷ According to Brookings Institution scholar Shadi Hamid,

Assad is effectively being rewarded for the use of chemical weapons, rather than "punished" as originally planned. He has managed to remove the threat of U.S. military action while giving very little up in return.³⁸

Obama did eventually intervene in eastern Syria alongside some of Washington's Western allies, but this was directed against ISIS, which had established its caliphate over vast swaths of land in Iraq and Syria, rather than against the Assad regime. In fact, the regime had been shielded from U.S. retribution since September 2015 when Russian air and ground forces arrived to help suppress the rebellion.

Obama's "leading from behind" policy in Libya left his European partners to bear the invasion's brunt.

Why Did So Much Go So Wrong?

There is little doubt that the Iraq war loomed large in Obama's Middle East calculations. Not only did he have widely divergent ideological differences from his predecessor, but in addition, according to Jeffrey Goldberg, Obama "was tired of watching Washington unthinkingly drift toward war in Muslim countries."³⁹ This explains a number of his blunders: his reluctance to rely on Bush's Status of Forces Agreement for keeping U.S. military presence in Iraq and his insistence on securing Iraqi parliamentary support for this possibility though backing never came; his decision not to intervene in the Syrian civil war against the advice of his "interventionist" foreign policy advisors; his reluctance to take any measures to contain ISIS until the group beheaded three Americans in late spring 2014; and his "leading from behind" policy in Libya, which left the Europeans to bear the invasion's brunt.⁴⁰ According to Goldberg, Obama told him that if there had been no Iraq, no Afghanistan, and no Libya, he might have been more apt to take risks in Syria:

A president does not make decisions in a vacuum. He does not have a blank slate ... any thoughtful president would hesitate about making a renewed commitment in the exact same region of the world with some of the exact same dynamics and the

³⁷ Dany Shoham, "[Syria's Chemical Arsenal: Obama's Failure, Trump's Mixed Success](#)," *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2020.

³⁸ Shadi Hamid, "The U.S.-Russian Deal on Syria: [A Victory for Assad](#)," The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., Sept. 14, 2013; Goldberg, "[The Obama Doctrine](#)."

³⁹ Goldberg, "[The Obama Doctrine](#)."

⁴⁰ Ryan Liza, "[The Consequentialist](#)," *The New Yorker*, Apr. 25, 2011.

same probability of an unsatisfactory outcome.⁴¹

This reticence helps explain Obama's obsession with multilateralism: not just because it imparted a seeming aura of international legitimacy on his policies (notably the JCPOA) but because it split the interventionist burden and risks among several participants and provided handy scapegoats to be blamed for potential failures. Thus, while admitting that the Libya intervention "didn't work," and that the country remained "a mess" (or a "shit-show" as he called it in private), Obama ascribed the failure first and foremost to "the passivity of America's allies and ... the obdurate power of tribalism."⁴²

Obama's lack of self-accountability was also evidenced by his refusal to acknowledge the wide dissonance between his high human rights rhetoric and actual policies (and for that matter, any foreign policy mistake). He saw no problem in sermonizing local autocrats on the need for democratization (peremptorily telling some of them to step down during the early days of the "Arab Spring"⁴³) and doing nothing to promote these goals. And he spoke on the need to be "on the right side of history" and excoriated civilian deaths in internecine conflicts as "a stain on our collective conscience,"⁴⁴ yet did almost nothing to stop the slaughter of half a million Syrians by their unelected ruler. On the contrary, he said he was "very proud" of

Obama's obsession with multilateralism provided handy scapegoats to be blamed for potential failures.

his decision to call back the August 2013 air strike against the Syrian regime—the only time he seemed poised to punish Assad for his crimes—despite its profoundly demoralizing impact on the Syrian rebels and Washington's regional allies. In the words of a rebel leader:

I think that Obama is the most cowardly American president. ... What is he waiting for, another two years of killing until all the Syrians get killed? There is no peaceful solution. If there is no military strike, the crisis will never be solved.⁴⁵

Nor did Obama see any contradiction between his refusal to consider Saudi Arabia a true ally due to its human rights record and his pandering to the more repressive regime in Tehran. As early as 2002, he had urged President Bush "to make sure our so-called allies in the Middle East—the Saudis and the Egyptians—stop oppressing their own people, and suppressing dissent, and tolerating corruption and inequality."⁴⁶ As president, Obama regularly railed against the kingdom's non-democratic nature, arguing that "a country cannot function in the modern world when it is repressing half of its population" and telling foreign leaders, "You can gauge the success of a society by how it treats its women."⁴⁷ Yet he eagerly offered

⁴¹ Goldberg, "[The Obama Doctrine](#)."

⁴² [Ibid.](#)

⁴³ See, for example, Voice of America, [Jan. 31, 2011](#).

⁴⁴ "[Text: Obama's Speech in Cairo](#)."

⁴⁵ Barbara Surk and Zeina Karam, "[Syrian opposition forces feel let down by Obama](#)," Associated Press, Sept. 11, 2013.

⁴⁶ *The Telegraph* (London), [May 21, 2017](#).

⁴⁷ Goldberg, "[The Obama Doctrine](#)."

“an extended hand”⁴⁸ to the Islamist regime in Tehran, which stoned adulterous women and executed gay people,⁴⁹ alongside scores of political dissidents. And as he admonished Middle East regimes in his Cairo speech that “you must maintain your power through consent, not coercion; you must respect the rights of minorities, and participate with a spirit of tolerance and compromise,”⁵⁰ Obama remained glaringly mute when several weeks later the Iranian regime brutally suppressed the pro-democracy “Green Revolution.” Six years later, as part of the JCPOA, he had no qualms about unfreezing billions of dollars to the designated state sponsor of terrorism, which had for nearly four decades derided the United States as “The Great Satan” and which was openly subverting Washington’s regional allies and threatening one of them with outright destruction.

Obama’s naiveté concerning regional realities was also manifested by his seeming obliviousness to longstanding inter-state rivalries and the resolve of states and societies to protect their values, interests, and regional influence. Consider, for example, his belief that the attainment of an Iran nuclear deal would facilitate a “cold peace” between Tehran and Riyadh that would lead to a wider amelioration of conflicts since the “competition between the Saudis and the



Photo: Daniel Schwen

Obama’s Middle East policies weakened the U.S. regional position and exposed the weaknesses of multilateralism. Biden’s rhetoric raises questions about whether his Middle East policy will resemble that of the Obama presidency.

Iranians ... has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen.”⁵¹ Apart from disregarding the indigenous historical roots of these conflicts, this misperception not only underestimated the intensity of the Saudi fear of Iran but totally misunderstood the nature of the Islamist regime in Tehran and the extent of its imperialist ambitions. As a result, the JCPOA had the opposite effect of that intended by Obama: It intensified Saudi-Iranian enmity while accelerating Iranian regional aggressiveness and damaging U.S. relations with its regional allies.

Conclusion

All in all, Obama’s Middle Eastern record is far from impressive. He failed to deliver the repeatedly promised Afghanistan victory or the ouster of the Assad regime; his

⁴⁸ Reuters, [Jan. 27, 2009](#).

⁴⁹ Mike Wooldridge, “[Iran’s grim history of death by stoning.](#)” *BBC News*, July 10, 2010; John Haltiwanger, “[Iran’s top diplomat says his country executes gay people because of ‘moral principles.’](#)” *Business Insider* (New York), June 12, 2019.

⁵⁰ “[Remarks by the President at Cairo University.](#)”

⁵¹ Goldberg, “[The Obama Doctrine.](#)”

rushed Iraq withdrawal created a power vacuum that enabled the expansion of ISIS and the deepening of Iranian influence while the Libya intervention generated a similarly chaotic situation; and he made Palestinian-Israeli reconciliation ever more remote by disincentivizing Israeli concessions while intensifying Palestinian intransigence. Even the JCPOA, the supposed jewel in Obama's Middle East crown, was a deeply flawed agreement: It left the door open for the attainment of Iranian nuclear weapons and continuation of its hegemonic expansion while driving a wedge between Washington and its foremost regional allies.

The Obama administration's policies reflected a poor conceptualization of the Middle East. The president and his advisors misjudged, ignored, or misunderstood key regional characteristics and realities, notably the pervasiveness and intensity of internal divisions—social, ethnic, tribal, and religious among others. They repeatedly put faith in partners, actors, and processes that were unwilling or incapable of delivering the desired outcomes. Schisms did not ameliorate. Democratic processes did not ensue or take hold. States and their institutions did not strengthen, and Islamist terrorism did not

abate. The Afghan and Iraqi governments failed once Washington stepped back. Post-Qaddafi Libya devolved into chaos. Many Coptic Christians and secular Egyptians were relieved to substitute the old familiar military regime for the short-lived Islamist government.

While Obama cannot be faulted for every calamity befalling the Middle East during the eight years of his presidency, his policies undoubtedly did much to make a bad situation worse. They exacerbated ongoing conflicts, damaged relations with key regional allies, weakened U.S. regional position and interests, and exposed the inherent weaknesses of multilateralism. President-elect Biden would be unwise to look back in time to the Obama era for his Middle East policies and should rather rethink certain core assumptions about the region so as to adopt new policies that take into account the region's longstanding trends and dynamics as well as new realities.

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