



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The Middle East in the Final Year of the Obama Administration

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Jan 2016

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Introduction

In his recent State of the Union address to Congress, United States President Barack Obama outlined the features of his administration's foreign policy for its remaining year, and attempted to rebut the accusations of opponents at home and abroad that his administration had rolled back American power and influence around the world. For the critics, American leadership is waning as a result of Obama's timid international policy, which they have characterized as hesitant and failing. In his speech on January 12, 2016, Obama stressed that the US remains the top global power and would continue to be so, never relinquishing its leadership position to any other state. Obama praised what he deemed the foreign policy successes of his administration, particularly those of 2015, such as the nuclear agreement with Iran, the restoration of diplomatic relations with Cuba, the Climate Change Agreement, and Pacific Trade Agreement.¹ However, despite Secretary of State John Kerry's efforts in a speech to the National Defense University the following day to elaborate the administration's foreign policy for its final year,² there is still a widespread impression that lack of clarity and hesitation will remain the main characteristics of Obama's foreign policy until his last day in office.

Leadership without Involvement

In response to his critics, Obama stated that the main challenges for the US today are to keep the country safe and lead the world without becoming its policeman. He stressed that keeping the homeland "safe and strong" does not mean "isolating ourselves", but rather dealing with emerging challenges in a more effective and less costly fashion. He admitted that this is "a dangerous time", as the post-World War II order changes, and that the challenges facing the US and the world are rooted in the increase in "failing states", not the presence of "evil empires," or a decline in American power. Obama insisted that the US should avoid involvement in attempts at rebuilding every state that falls into crisis, saying: "That's not leadership; that's a recipe for quagmire, spilling American blood and treasure that ultimately will weaken us. It's the lesson of Vietnam; it's the lesson of Iraq -- and we should have learned it by now."

¹ "Remarks of President Barack Obama—State of the Union Address As Delivered," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, January 13, 2016, at: <http://1.usa.gov/1P05B5F>.

² Secretary of State John Kerry "Remarks on the United States Foreign Policy Agenda for 2016," at the National Defense University, U.S. Department of State, January 13, 2016, at: <http://1.usa.gov/1OsV90S>.

The alternative to this direct projection of American power is its “wise application”, defined by Obama as the “smarter approach” of a patient and disciplined strategy that utilizes all the elements of American power. This strategy is a reiteration of the Obama approach of the last seven years that “America will always act, alone if necessary, to protect our people and our allies; but on issues of global concern, we will mobilize the world to work with us, and make sure other countries pull their own weight.” Obama gave a number of examples in this regard to affirm the success of a strategy which many see as a failure. In Syria, the US is “partnering” with local forces (meaning separatist Kurdish forces and the so-called ‘moderate’ Syrian forces), and leading an international coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In handling Iran, the US formed an international coalition that imposed harsh diplomatic and economic sanctions, ultimately resulting in the nuclear agreement. He also referenced the Trans-Pacific Trade Agreement, the Paris Climate Change Agreement, and American and international efforts to fight infectious diseases in Africa and elsewhere.³

Kerry, however, feels that “the demand for United States leadership ... is as high as it has ever been,” and rejects assessments that see the world as becoming more chaotic and unsettled as a result of any waning American role. He puts this impression down to the fact that conflict in the last century was between nation states governed by considerations of weapons, deterrence and profit-loss calculations; by contrast, today’s threats, such as ISIL, give little heed to such considerations.⁴ In this way, Kerry is continuing the approach of scaremongering and exaggerating the strength of ISIL, without setting out a real plan to confront it. This expresses the continued crisis in American discourse on the Middle East.

US Foreign–Policy Priorities in the Middle East

It was obvious that President Obama in the State of the Union was trying to exonerate himself and his administration from any responsibility for the chaos that has swept through the Middle East on his watch, when he stated, “The Middle East is going through a transformation that will play out for a generation, rooted in conflicts that date back millennia.” This represents an official endorsement of the myth of a Sunni-Shia

³ “Remarks of President Barack Obama.”

⁴ “Secretary of State John Kerry.”

conflict as lying at the heart of the matter, disregarding the fact that conflicts so-designated only became fraught and violent after a George W. Bush-led US invaded Iraq in 2003, established sectarian power-sharing there, and left Iraq prey to Iran. If the Bush administration was directly responsible for this situation, his successor in the White House is not entirely blameless; the Obama administration remained a passive—or complicit—observer of Iranian involvement in support for the Bashar Assad regime against his own people, backed Nouri al-Maliki as Iraqi prime minister in the face of elections results that favored Ayad Allawi, and turned a blind eye to al-Maliki's sectarian policies in Iraq and to the Houthis in Yemen, leading to heightened sectarian tensions in the region. Today, the US views Iran as part of the solution in Syria; according to Kerry, "[I]t is not to be missed by anybody here that even Iran put forward an important contribution to the dialogue in a peace plan that called for a unity government, constitutional reform, a ceasefire, and an election" in Syria.⁵ In this way, Kerry has changed his position from support for the creation of a transitional governing authority to a national unity government in Syria, and Iran has become a part of the solution despite what it and its militias have been doing in Syria for five years.

In terms of US priorities in the Middle East during 2016, they can be identified according to Obama's and Kerry's speeches as follows:

1. Fighting ISIL and al-Qaeda

For Obama, his administration's number one priority is "protecting the American people and going after terrorist networks," specifying al-Qaeda and ISIL. He cautioned against over-the-top claims that this is "World War III" and clarified that movements such as ISIL and al-Qaeda "pose an enormous danger to civilians; they have to be stopped. But they do not threaten our national existence."⁶ According to Obama and Kerry, the US is undertaking this offensive through its leadership of a coalition of 65 states that is carrying out air strikes against ISIL strongholds in Iraq and Syria, working to cut its funding, targeting oil wells and facilities under its control, working to stop the flow of fighters, and training and arming Iraqi regular forces, the Kurds in Syria and Iraq, and the Syrian opposition to "degrad[e] and defeat[e] Daesh."⁷ Kerry sees that the coalition

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Remarks of President Barack Obama."

⁷ "Secretary of State John Kerry."

is open to other states to join, and he singled out Russia, despite most assessments, including American ones, affirming that Moscow is concentrating its air raids against the Syrian opposition that the United States classes as “moderate” and “legitimate” (while refusing to provide it with weapons and warning its allies not to do so).

2. Finding a Solution to the Syria Crisis

Although Obama only made three passing references to Syria in his speech, such as offering support to allied local forces on the ground in the war on ISIL, Kerry was more expansive on the subject, explaining that US strategy on Syria has three levels:

- Intensification of the military campaign against ISIL.
- Preventing ISIL from spreading to other states, such as Libya, by strengthening the defensive capabilities of allied states like Jordan and Lebanon to confront the threat, and by the effort to contain the refugee crisis in Syrian and Iraq.
- Defusing the crisis in Syria through an agreement over a political transition that preserves the cohesion and secularism of Syria, and “allows Sunni and Shia and Druze and Ismaili and Christians all to live together.” Kerry held that this had been achieved by last November’s Vienna Agreement between the members of the International Syria Support Group, which managed to persuade Saudi Arabia and Iran to sit down at the same table for the first time and agreed “to advance the political transition, to isolate the terrorists, and to help the Syrian people begin to rebuild their country.”⁸

Nevertheless, and as a new indication of American hesitancy, haziness, and continuing decline, Kerry is now playing the role of Russia’s Godfather by pressuring the Syrian opposition to rejig its negotiating team put together at the Riyadh conference to include elements and movements that meet Russian and Assad regime conditions. At the recent World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Kerry announced that the solution in Syria would only come about through agreeing a national unity government, and that the US, along with Iran and Russia, were convinced of this. Kerry’s threat to the head of the High Commission for the negotiations at Riyadh on January 23 was revealed: “If

⁸ Ibid.

the opposition do not go to Geneva (to negotiate with the regime) according to the conditions imposed on them, they will lose the support of their allies."⁹

3. Confirmation of Iran's Implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Working Plan

It is well known that the Obama administration considers the signing of the nuclear agreement with Iran in Vienna last summer as its prize foreign-policy achievement, and important for Obama's personal presidential legacy. Obama referenced this in this speech, "That's why we built a global coalition, with sanctions and principled diplomacy, to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran. And as we speak, Iran has rolled back its nuclear program, shipped out its uranium stockpile, and the world has avoided another war."¹⁰ Kerry also referred to the issue in his speech, commending the Iranian move to decommission the Arak nuclear reactor, which was filled with concrete the following day (January 14, 2016).¹¹ The nuclear deal is undoubtedly a real achievement, but Obama and Kerry disregard Iran's other policies that are destabilizing the region, stoking sectarian tensions, and attempting to meddle with the security of the Arab Gulf states, as well as of Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

Conclusion

In all probability, there will not be any major change to US foreign policy during the final year of the Obama administration, either on the level of strategy or in terms of the prevailing vision. However, some priorities in the Middle East have changed. The Obama administration no longer sees the removal of Assad as a condition for a transition agreement in Syria. At the same time, the Palestinian issue has all but fallen off the to-do list of a president who from his first day in office declared that the creation of a Palestinian state was at the top of his agenda. A hesitant America is willingly adapting to the changes in the balance of power on the ground.

⁹ "Syrian opposition rejects orders and criticizes American 'back-tracking'," *Al Jazeera Net*, January 24, 2016, at: <http://bit.ly/1S2IvMy>.

¹⁰ "Remarks of President Barack Obama."

¹¹ "Iran Fills Nuclear Reactor Core with Concrete, US Says," *Voice of America*, January 14, 2016, at: <http://bit.ly/1RRIE3F>.

Therefore, it is preferable for US allies in the region to shift from a phase of anxiety over the policies of this administration to a phase of taking the initiative to create policies that take their interests into account above anything else. The alternative is to become like Ukraine in the Obama foreign-policy approach, which received a few empty words in his speech, while Russia, subject to economic sanctions for having annexed the Crimean Peninsula, is subject to diplomatic outreach regarding Syria. The Obama administration has adapted itself to the Russia interpretation of the Geneva agreement, and even with its position on the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons. It cannot be ruled out that the Obama administration will repeat the same scenario in the context of its Gulf-Iranian relations, by pressuring Riyadh to restore diplomatic relations with Tehran, which it has indeed started to do.¹²

Those who rely on US foreign policy at this juncture are deluding themselves. Perhaps there is an opportunity at this moment for some Arab governments to free themselves from US tutelage, but they will have to take the measures necessary to achieve that freedom.

¹² David Brunnstrom, "U.S. 'hopes' Saudi Arabia may reopen Tehran embassy," *Reuters*, January 22, 2016, at: <http://reut.rs/1nqOo9E>.