



PERSPECTIVES

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[Needed: A Leader in the White House](#)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The cornerstones of US President Barack Obama's Middle East strategy have collapsed. Turkey, once an exemplar moderate Islamic democracy, and Egypt, once an exemplar stable and moderate Arab power, have become increasingly unreliable allies. The lack of leadership and clear policy principles evinced by the Obama White House have severely weakened America's position in the Middle East, leaving a void to be filled by hostile regional powers such as Iran.

In April 2009, during his first official visit overseas, US President Barak Obama delivered a historical speech before the Turkish parliament in Ankara. Two months later, he delivered a similar speech at Cairo University. These visits and speeches marked a sharp turn-about in America's Middle East strategy. Obama vowed to replace military might with soft power and diplomacy; to reconcile with the Arab and Muslim world; to conduct effective negotiations with enemies; and thus to bolster America's position in the Middle East.

The Cornerstones of Obama's Doctrine: Turkey and Egypt

Ironically, the latest changes in Ankara's regional strategy and the upheavals in Cairo clearly demonstrate the total failure of Obama's plan, as his two doctrinal cornerstones have collapsed.

The US viewed Turkey as a model for a moderate, pro-Western, Islamic democracy, worthy of emulation by the authoritarian Arab states. Obama also saw in Turkey a promising ground for his new strategy, which distinguished between fundamentalist-extremist Islam, such as Al-Qaeda, against which an all-out war should be conducted, and moderate Islam, such as the Turkish model, with which one should strive to cooperate. Mubarak's Egypt seemed an island of regime

stability, a moderate regional superpower, pro-American and peace-seeking by virtue of the example it set for the Arab world when it signed the first Israeli-Arab peace agreement.

The fall of Mubarak's regime is, in part, a result of Obama's back stabbing. The transitional military government displays great ineptitude and operates, for the most part, at the behest of the radical street. The prevailing Egyptian anarchy enabled the severe Palestinian attack on Israelis along the Egyptian-Israeli border and the attacks on the Israeli embassy in Cairo. It is likely that the forthcoming elections will greatly increase the influence of the radical Muslim Brotherhood on Egypt's domestic and foreign affairs.

The Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement, reached through dramatic US mediation, is in jeopardy. The US, which gives Egypt on average \$2 billion in annual aid, stands helpless. Any hope for the establishment of a stable, democratic regime has evaporated. Instead, the US strives to minimize damages by cooperating with the Muslim Brotherhood. Such cooperation, however, is doomed to fail. A similar plan collapsed in Iran in 1979. Prior to Khomeini's rise to power, the aides of then US President Jimmy Carter naively thought that if they assisted the toppling of the Shah's regime and negotiated with Khomeini's people, they could establish friendly relations with the new government in Tehran. While the reverse outcome of this deluded policy is well known, it seems that present policy-makers in Washington have not learned from this experience.

Collapse of the Turkish Model

Over the last year, Turkey has become more Islamic and aggressive, and less democratic and cooperative with the US. The Turkish model of moderate Islamic democracy has become unreliable. Prime Minister Erdogan has systematically violated basic civil rights. He imprisoned journalists of whom he did not approve, appointed judges who were loyal to his party and creed, and deposed and imprisoned military officers whom he suspected of disloyalty. Erdogan conducts himself in the region as the local thug: Enabling the deterioration of relations with Israel, supporting radical Islamist groups and movements, and threatening to use force conflict with Western interests, particularly those of the US.

In the era of uprisings in the Arab world and among demands by the masses for democratization, the Turkish model no longer represents a recipe for genuine democracy. In contrast to Obama's perspective, the Turkish regime represents a real danger in its potential to serve as a bad example, both in domestic and foreign affairs, to Islamic regimes that could replace authoritarian regimes which have fallen or are about to fall. Despite this, Washington still perceives Erdogan as a moderate Islamic partner.

Toward an "Islamic Winter"

Obama's appeasement strategy has been perceived by the Arab and Islamic world as an exploitable weakness. The endless, failing and costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the severe economic crisis, have increased the feeling in the region that the US is on the decline and its influence is limited. America's frenetic and inconsistent policy vis-à-vis the recent uprisings in many Arab states has only added to the lack of faith in US leadership and resolve.

Between Ankara and Cairo, American diplomacy has lost its influence. Obama failed to halt the Iranian race for nuclear weapons; he failed to bring the Palestinians to the negotiating table and to foil their plan to obtain a UN resolution for the establishment of a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders; and finally, he has failed to mediate a compromise between Turkey and Israel based on the Palmer Report on the flotilla to Gaza. Had there been a strong, determined leader at the helm in Washington, it is doubtful that Erdogan would have adopted such a hostile and belligerent policy toward Israel. It is just as doubtful whether Mahmoud Abbas would have ignored the US and bypassed negotiations with Israel by going to the UN.

With all the whisperings over America's weakness, it is unsurprising that players like Iran and Turkey are looking to fill the vacuum left in its place – to become regional powers with global influence. One should not be overly impressed by US pressures on Egypt to extricate Israeli security personnel from the embassy in Cairo, or from US criticism of Erdogan's threats to send battleships to escort future flotillas to Gaza. A strong and deterring United States would not have needed to take such steps. These actions do not display leadership and determination, which are still missing from Obama's White House.

All signs indicate that prior to the birth of an "Arab spring," the Middle East is likely to first experience an "Islamic winter." Such an outcome would severely challenge the US, the West and Israel.

When the US is perceived as strong, so are its allies, like Israel, and when it is perceived as weak, its allies weaken as well. Perhaps a new US president, who may be elected one year from now, will be able to restore the US to its former might and influence. In the meantime, Israel must contend with a hostile Arab and international public opinion and a declining United States.

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