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Obama and the Middle East

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: US President Barack Obama has adopted an activist foreign policy, attempting to engage the Muslim world and signaling his expectation that an end the Israel-Palestinian conflict can be negotiated within two years. This ambitious agenda has so far produced meager results. Many regional players are primarily concerned about Iran's quest for nuclear weapons, and are not easily amenable to American overtures.

US President Barack Obama's summit meeting with Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas in New York this week was a good thing, but it amounted to little more than a photo opportunity. The impatient Obama demanded that the parties seriously discuss peace now. Obama appeared to be on the verge of enunciating his own peace plan in order to restart peace negotiations and to eventually end the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict – all within two years!

It is worth reminding the president that the many past US peace plans for the Middle East failed to bring the anticipated results. Moreover, the recent meeting in New York only reinforces the evaluation that after eight months in office, the record of Obama's policy toward the Middle East is far from impressive.

Obama's much heralded speech to the Muslim world in Cairo failed to make a dent in Middle Eastern realities and attitudes. His belief in the power of words to

change people is naive when it comes to well-rooted attitudes or entrenched interests of nations. In instances where the US sided with Muslims when in conflict with non-Muslims, such as in Pakistan, Bosnia and Kosovo, there was little impact on Muslim dispositions. The anti-American rage among Muslims, primarily Arabs, is a result of a concatenation of factors: frustration originating from past grandeur, current poverty, backwardness, and a dark future; a cultural difficulty to accept responsibility; and a preference to blame others for failures to modernize and democratize. While words have great importance in Muslim culture, even the best of speeches cannot change the tide of history. Obama's words are unlikely to have long-term positive effects for the US, which in final analysis is seen as foreign and domineering.

The "soft power" that this administration extols has its limitations, particular in a region where the use of force is part and parcel of the rules of the game and fear is a better political currency than empathy or love.

So far the "engagement" policy toward Iran, which is part of the new approach to the Muslim world, has produced no results. The nuclear program of Iran continues, and its new proposal to the West did not provide any opening for negotiations on the nuclear issue.

Similarly, the engagement of radical Syria hardly changed Syrian policies. Damascus still supports Hizballah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza; allows insurgents to infiltrate Iraq in order to destabilize the current regime; refuses to enter peace negotiations with Israel without preconditions; and above all continues its alliance with Iran. Why should Assad change Syrian foreign policy if he fears no American wrath? As a matter of fact, Iran, Syria, as well as the rest of the Middle East, see "engagement" primarily as an American weakness.

Obama's Washington does not get anywhere even with its friends. The leaders in all Arab countries know that the American "engagement" of Iran is hopeless in stopping the nuclearization of Iran. During his August trip to Washington, Mubarak of Egypt tried to inject sense into the young American president. Moreover, Mubarak rejected Obama's offer for a nuclear umbrella. So did other pro-American Arab states. American promises to defend them are simply not credible if the US is reluctant to use military force to stop the Iranian nuclear threat.

The impending American withdrawal from Iraq and the difficulties in "fixing" Afghanistan contribute to the general sense of a decline in American influence in

the Middle East. Indeed, as regional politics take their toll, a Pax Americana in the Middle East is no longer seen as a viable option for providing progress and prosperity. It is not only the Palestinians that have failed to develop a capacity to govern, with institutions that respond to the needs of the people. The political malaise of the Palestinians is not unique. We see several additional failed states in the Arab world: Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, and even Iraq. Pakistan, a Muslim state, is in danger of collapsing. Even American conquests, such as in Iraq and in Afghanistan, coupled with generous international aid, are not enough to transform these countries. Neither American speeches, nor American “soft power” are able to reform societies deep in crisis. Only a modernizing local leadership can do the trick.

Ignoring the harsh realities of Palestinian domestic politics, Obama is now trying to restart the bogged-down Israel-Palestinian peace track. Yet the Arabs have rejected American demands for gestures toward Israel in order to facilitate a settlement freeze (the latter curiously seen as a panacea for peace between Israelis and Palestinians). Moreover, Washington fails to understand that as long as the Palestinians are deeply divided and Gaza is controlled by Hamas, an Islamist organization dedicated to the destruction of the state of Israel, there is no available partner for peace talks. Nevertheless, Obama is committed to push forward on the peace process.

Unfortunately, the gap between Israelis and Palestinians is too large to bridge, while the two societies still have enormous amounts of energy to fight for what is important to them. This situation requires conflict management, rather than ambitious and misguided peace plans.

What is missing in Washington is healthy skepticism and a realistic foreign policy based upon the premises that not all problems are soluble and that foreigners have limited capacity to induce change. Finally, Obama’s Washington seems unaware of the fact that the regional parties have great obstructive power. Only when they are ready there will be peace.

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