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Israel, Palestine and the Arab Spring

And so to all other peoples and governments who are watching today, from the grandest capitals to the small village where my father was born: Know that America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and that we are ready to lead once more.

—President Barack Obama, Inaugural Address, 2009¹

One benefit of the Obama Presidency is that it is validating much of George W. Bush's security agenda and foreign policy merely by dint of autobiographical rebranding. That was clear enough yesterday in Cairo, where President Obama advertised "a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world."

But what he mostly offered were artfully repackaged versions of themes President Bush sounded with his freedom agenda.

—"Barack Hussein Bush," *Wall Street Journal* editorial,
June 5, 2009²

... a voluntary agreement between the parties is unattainable. The only possible path forward is an externally imposed solution.

—Avi Shlaim, *Israel and Palestine*³

... an administration strongly committed to pursuing Arab-Israeli peace almost always trumps the opposition of domestic interest groups, but not without some messy fights ...

—Aaron David Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land*⁴

Introduction

Unlike both his immediate White House predecessors – Bill Clinton and George W. Bush – Barack Obama had publicly pledged to focus from day one of his presidency on advancing a lasting settlement of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, both for its intrinsic importance and because he viewed rapid progress on this festering strategic sore as being essential for securing wider US national interests in the Middle East and beyond. While Bush had waited several

years before seriously confronting the problem, in part because of Clinton's frustrating experiences negotiating a peace settlement during his final year of office, Obama's engagement strategy was launched from his first day in the Oval Office. As an illustration of its priority status, the president's first international phone call from the White House was to Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, followed by calls to then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah II of Jordan. On his second day in office the president then named the well-respected former Democratic senator from Maine, George Mitchell – Clinton's successful envoy in the Northern Ireland Peace Process – as his Middle East special envoy.

But, much as for several of his predecessors, few issues proved as stubbornly intractable. Obama himself considered the Israel-Palestinian conflict his one area of foreign policy "failure" in 2009, conceding that the administration had "overestimated our ability to persuade" the two parties to take concrete steps to advance the peace process "when their (domestic) politics ran contrary to that."⁵ Complicating the president's task was not only the missteps of his own administration on the issue and the intransigence of the Binyamin Netanyahu coalition government in Israel, but also the sweeping protests across the region that saw long-standing US allies overthrown or challenged in the so-called "Arab Spring" of 2011. In one of the many ironies of his administration, having repudiated his predecessor's ambitious reform agenda for the Middle East and seeking instead to re-orient the priority of US foreign policy to the Asia-Pacific, Obama found himself – reluctantly and after considerable internal deliberation and disagreement – supporting, albeit highly selectively, the very "freedom agenda" that he had previously shied away from; in turn prompting emotive accusations that the president "has no alternative strategic vision to replace the neo-conservative fantasies of his predecessor" and "that the United States has little to offer the region and its people."⁶

Obama found himself caught on the horns of the historic strategic dilemma of US foreign policy: between a realist policy focused on influencing the external behavior of states and their inter-relations, and an idealist one seeking to alter the internal nature of states. Much as the momentous events of September 11, 2001 had transformed George W. Bush's initially "humble" foreign policy into something much more ambitious, so Obama's early distancing himself from the region in pursuit of an Asian-Pacific priority was – at least for 2011 – temporarily confounded by the dramatic and destabilizing uprisings from Tunisia to Syria.

By the latter stages of his first term, the Middle East had assumed a prominent part of a post-American international landscape, but with Washington keener to lead from behind than from the front. American foreign policy towards the region remained in uncertain flux, traditional US allies having been displaced, Saudi Arabia and Iran having become engaged in a proxy war across the region, Israel and Iran effectively in the midst of a secret war, and conditions

on the ground having made a genuine peace between Israelis and Palestinians even more dim and distant than in 2009.

Moreover, the impending transformation of the Arab states augured poorly for existing peace treaties between Israel and its neighbors, with the voice of Arab peoples no more favorable towards either the US or Israel at the end of Obama's first term than at its outset: an outcome given vivid expression by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the more extreme Salafist parties, together winning some 60 percent of the vote in the nation's November 2011 parliamentary elections. As Robert Kaplan argues, "In truth, the Middle East is undergoing less a democratic revolution than a crisis in central authority,"⁷ one with unstable and decidedly troubled futures. Far from the Arab Uprising having made what Netanyahu regularly referred to as a "tough neighborhood" more gentrified, the region threatened to get still tougher, not only for its long-suffering residents but also for the preservation of US national interests and influence. Moreover, in resisting Washington's waxing and waning pressures to compromise and conciliate, an Israel facing concerted attempts at "de-legitimation" delivered to President Obama what some regarded as "the most dramatic foreign-policy defeat of his first term in office."⁸ By the latter part of his term, with Saudi Arabia threatening ominously to end its own "special relationship" with Washington, America's evaporating influence in the Middle East threatened to reach rock bottom amid a diplomatic tsunami of epic proportions.

Obama's strategic options

After the attacks of 9/11, the Middle East became the key theater of US foreign policy for the first time in American history. The controversial policies of the Bush administration, and in particular the 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent occupation, prompted widespread outrage within the region and polarized debate within the United States. In response, some scholars of US foreign policy effectively embraced a neo-isolationist position, arguing that the region's reliably dystopian features made it "the middle of nowhere" and calling for US withdrawal.⁹ Others, however, insisted that its geo-political importance and centrality to the functioning of the global economy was such that the US needed to remain engaged, no matter how difficult, frustrating and costly the commitment.¹⁰ For the Obama administration, although the inherited problem of Iraq, the festering wound of Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the rising challenge of Iran all demanded urgent attention, the increasing importance of the Asia-Pacific region to US geo-political interests recommended instead a decisive rebalancing of Washington's focus away from the Middle East.

In strategic terms, the fundamental national interests of the US in the Middle East are broadly agreed upon by most observers within the Beltway: ensuring the uninterrupted flow of oil at stable and reasonable prices (not so

much for US consumption but rather to sustain the global economy); blocking the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and nuclear weapons in particular; protecting key US and Western allies, including Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt; countering terrorism, political violence and extremism; and promoting democratic and liberalizing reform in ways that bolster rather than undermine a US-led regional order. How best to accomplish these multiple goals invariably poses a major test for policy-makers in Washington of both parties.

As Michael Scott Doran argues,¹¹ three approaches offered distinct perspectives on which principles should best guide US strategy in navigating the region's internecine conflicts and multiple challenges on Obama's assuming office in 2009. First, reflecting traditional Wilsonian precepts and the long-standing repression of the Arab peoples under authoritarian or monarchical rule, one perspective emphasizes the enlargement of political participation as the key step towards a more stable and just region, stressing democracy promotion as the touchstone for the US's regional strategy. A second view rejects overarching principles such as democratization or liberalization entirely, instead highlighting the complexity of the region, the distinctive challenges of each state therein, and advocating an un-doctrinaire, pragmatic country-by-country approach. A third perspective views the achievement of an elusive Arab-Israeli peace, including the establishment of a functional Palestinian state, as the essential first step towards boosting US credibility and revitalizing the US-led regional order.

As elsewhere, Obama's strategic engagement ebbed and flowed between these approaches across time. Initially, as his early phone calls indicated, the administration made the Arab-Israeli peace process the organizing principle of its Middle East policy. Indeed, rarely had a US president so clearly and repeatedly focused on the cause of peace as a strategic priority for Washington. In his June 2009 Cairo speech pledging a "new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world," for instance, Obama expressly identified "the situation between Israelis, Palestinians, and the Arab world" as a major cause of tension between America and Muslims.¹² Seeking to demonstrate American goodwill and casting the US as an honest broker under his leadership, the peace process thus became more than just a practical instrument for normalizing relations between Israel and its neighbors – it also emerged as, in effect, the defining litmus-test of American intentions towards Arabs and Muslims worldwide. As such, regardless of tangible outcomes, the peace process could not be abandoned under Obama as long as the US wished to continue to demonstrate goodwill towards the Muslim world.

Such an approach, even if it had been successful, was then seriously complicated by the Arab Spring of 2011. As the section below details, this in turn commended first a country-by-country approach to the administration and subsequently, after much internal deliberation, a return to an explicit embrace of democracy-promotion as dovetailing with both the national interests and

the values of the United States. By the end of Obama's first term, the precise contours of his administration's Middle East strategy were in dramatic flux, with elements of all three approaches present but none seemingly dominant. George Mitchell had resigned on May 13, 2011 in frustration at the lack of progress on an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, with Hamas and Fatah having formed a nominal "unity government" on May 4. Facing the potential for mass revolts that had motivated other Arab populations to rise up against their rulers – protesting corruption, nepotism, cronyism, and incompetence – the Palestinians risked American and Israeli ire by seeking support for statehood at the United Nations in New York in late September 2011. At least as important to the Obama administration's fate, in terms of substantive results, was a region in which hardliners on all sides had, in effect, been inadvertently encouraged, emboldened and empowered, making the resolution of long-standing conflicts more rather than less straightforward. Democracy in the Middle East, one of the most fraught and problematic issues of the Bush era, re-emerged as the signature conflict of Obama's foreign policy presidency too. As with other aspects of Obama's post-American foreign policy, the limits of strategic engagement became starkly apparent in the febrile geo-politics of a Middle East in the twin throes of revolution and reaction.

Israel and the Palestinian territories

In their controversial book, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt began their analysis by reviewing the breadth of agreement on Israel among the leading Democratic and Republican candidates for the presidency in the 2008 election. Referring to a speech given by Barack Obama to an AIPAC audience in Chicago in 2007, Mearsheimer and Walt noted that – despite Obama having previously expressed sympathy for the Palestinians – the then junior US Senator for Illinois "made it manifestly clear that he would do nothing to change the US-Israeli relationship."¹³

But, as with much of their analysis, Mearsheimer and Walt were wrong. From the outset of his tenure as president, Obama struck a more realist, cool and at times even confrontational tone than prior US administrations in his dealings with the Israelis. The president appeared to agree unequivocally with the notion that more-or-less unconditional American support for Israel, and especially its continued occupation and settlement expansion in the West Bank since 1967, was manifestly not in the national interest of the US. This was in stark contrast not only to his Republican predecessor, George W. Bush, but also to Bill Clinton, two presidents whom most Israelis regarded as among the strongest of all White House advocates for Israeli interests.

As so often, Obama's seeking a middle way satisfied few of the more ideologically committed in the divisive debate over Israel. For some on the

right, President Obama had betrayed a long pattern of bipartisan defense of a key ally and effectively “declared war” on Israel.¹⁴ For many on the left, by contrast, any notion of Obama’s minimal antipathy towards Israel was starkly belied by “his total silence on Israel’s war on Gaza or its recent illegal attack on a ship carrying aid for Israel’s million-and-a-half victims in Gaza, not to mention the billions of dollars of US military and other aid to Israel.”¹⁵ As with so much of his approach to a post-American world, Obama’s Israel policy evidently stoked deeply divergent viewpoints both within and outside the US.

From the beginning of his presidency, and in contrast to the mostly incremental approach adopted towards Iran, the Obama administration favored the pursuit of a “comprehensive” peace settlement – a peace treaty involving not only the Palestinians and Israel but also the Arab states across the region and, especially, Syria and Lebanon (an added benefit of which might be, in the rather naive White House view, uncoupling Damascus from its Iranian ally, thereby also undermining Hezbollah and Hamas in the process).

The focal point for Obama’s diplomatic efforts was Jewish settlements. In a White House keen on its theoretical sophistication, this represented a potentially shrewd choice to exert leverage on Tel Aviv – since most Israelis were not strongly supportive of further settlement expansion, especially in the West Bank (the bulk of which had occurred in 1992–96, when the number of settlers increased by 50 percent at the height of the peace process). Nor, additionally, was settlement expansion something with especially strong support in the reliably pro-Israel US Congress. But diplomatic execution of the strategy by the administration was notably poor – an inexperienced White House staff substantially overestimating the extent of presidential influence while seriously misjudging the internal dynamics of Israeli coalition politics – with the ultimate result that the precondition of a freeze politically hobbled both sides to deeply detrimental effect.

Obama’s capacity for persuasion was fatally undercut almost from the outset by popular Israeli distrust of the president and declining Israeli confidence in the two-state solution and land-for-peace formula. Obama’s Cairo speech inadvertently exacerbated this predicament, since it was not accompanied by a visit to Israel – an apparent indication of American indifference to Israeli interests – and since the president’s public demand for an Israeli settlement freeze was not echoed by US calls on Arab states to take commensurate risks for peace. The president’s otherwise courageous attempt to confront Arab and Muslim Holocaust denial also proved politically problematic, since his grounding of support for the state of Israel in the Nazis’ World War Two genocide rather than in wider biblical and historical claims to Palestine, and his implicit comparison of Palestinian suffering since 1948 to the *Shoah*, together struck many indignant Israelis as deeply insensitive, ill-informed and gratuitously insulting.

Since domestic political pressure on Binyamin Netanyahu’s governing coalition came most heavily from the right side of the spectrum, the focus on

settlements also allowed the prime minister to stand firm on an issue of key importance to the right-wing, nationalist and ultra-religious elements in his fragile coalition government. Facing no pressure from the left, the political leverage that the settlers could therefore wield was formidable, the Jewish population on the Palestinian side of the Green Line having grown to half a million by 2009. In a comparatively rare example of Obama's allowing personal relations to impinge on foreign policy, the barely concealed personal animosity between Obama and Netanyahu powerfully exacerbated the strategic dilemma. As the former US State Department negotiator, Aaron David Miller, observed, "Prime Minister Netanyahu looks at President Obama as cold and unsympathetic to Israel's needs, and Obama sees Netanyahu as essentially a fast-talking con man."¹⁶

Such tensions were never fully appeased subsequently. An eventual compromise on settlement activity, reached in November 2009, for a ten-month freeze excluding Jerusalem, generated a new crisis when Secretary Clinton declared it "unprecedented" and a clear demonstration of Israeli "restraint," a statement that most Arabs found at once hilarious and ludicrous. At the same time, the embattled Palestinian Authority (PA) weakened further. Abbas, whose term had technically expired in January 2009, and who had already been undermined by his embarrassing reversal on the United Nations Goldstone report investigating the 2008 Gaza War, followed Obama's line on settlements as a condition to resuming peace talks, despite his awareness of the futility of the gambit. But, having taken a clear stand, the Palestinian leader was unable to climb down on the issue – yet until he did so, Israel in turn refused to resume negotiations, thereby effectively freezing the peace process for 2009–11. The Obama administration had been incensed when Vice-President Biden was humiliated on a visit to Jerusalem in March 2010 that saw the Israeli housing minister declare the construction of 1,600 new units in East Jerusalem, a public rebuke returned in kind when Obama abruptly left Netanyahu alone in the Oval Office on a subsequent meeting in Washington.

After months of frenetic diplomacy, the resumption of the first direct peace talks between Israeli and Palestinian leaders in twenty months occurred in Washington on September 2, 2010, with regular fortnightly efforts scheduled thereafter. The initiative had offered very tentative hopes of progress – Netanyahu having finally declared in public his acceptance of a demilitarized Palestinian state – subject to a formidable array of obstacles on all sides: for the Israelis, extremist religious and right-wing parties in the coalition; for Palestinians, the division and antipathy between Fatah and Hamas; and for Americans, the competing pressures on the administration from AIPAC, J-Street, Christians United for Israel and other lobby groups.

But the talks collapsed almost as soon as they had commenced, after Israel refused to extend its building freeze. Obama's unceasing pressure on Israel to

halt its building of new settlements was again adopted by Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas in an unprecedented prerequisite position for entering negotiations. Abbas professed that he was unable to be “less Palestinian than the US President himself.”¹⁷ Despite Israel temporarily freezing its settlement-building, the United States undermined its credibility as an arbiter when it ultimately reversed its position on the requirement of a prohibition on settlement-construction, enabling Abbas to walk away from the negotiating table. Although the nation-building efforts of PA Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad – to weed out corruption and create the institutions of a nascent working state – continued apace, in diplomatic terms the entire year of 2011 was effectively wasted, with Palestinian attentions directed instead to its high-risk gambit of building support through the UN to become the world’s 194th state.

Despite his obvious motivation to advance the peace, Obama encountered substantial problems that his predecessors had also confronted time and again in seeking to broker a deal between the rival parties. The underlying sources of conflict and distrust had long been based on the absence of a credible Palestinian interlocutor for the Israelis, one both representative of Palestinian opinion and capable of delivering genuine results on the ground. The Palestinians had been weak and divided since the passage of the Oslo Accords in 1993, unable to overcome their fractious divisions to secure tangible dividends. But the signing by Fatah and Hamas of an agreement in Cairo on May 4, 2011 brought to an end four years of especially intense hostilities. The agreement sought to lay the foundation for President Abbas to seek recognition of Palestine as a sovereign nation-state before the United Nations in September 2011. To become a full UN member state requires approval from the Security Council, not just the General Assembly. Such a strategy therefore had the attraction, to the Palestinians, of likely gaining majority support in the Assembly, highlighting and compounding Israel’s increasing international isolation, and gaining access to the International Criminal Court. In the event of nine Security Council members supporting the bid, a reluctant US would be forced either to use its veto power to prevent its passage – thereby affronting Muslims across the Islamic world – or not vetoing the measure, which would leave Israel feeling betrayed. At minimum, Abbas might secure the smallest upgrade in the Palestinian status at the UN from an “observer entity” to an “observer state,” like the Vatican.

On the Israeli side, the visit of Netanyahu to Washington on May 20, 2011 encapsulated in miniature the broader fissures and frustrations in the bilateral relationship. Rarely has the actual, as well as the body, language between an Israeli prime minister and American president been so obviously cold. In a speech to AIPAC on May 22, 2011, Obama sought to reassure the most ardent pro-Israeli supporters in the US that his commitment to Israel was “ironclad” while his interest in peace was driven by the fact that the existing situation was

unsustainable. The president cautioned the Palestinians against going to the UN to secure independence and reiterated that:

... the recent agreement between Fatah and Hamas poses an enormous obstacle to peace. No country can be expected to negotiate with a terrorist organization sworn to its destruction. We will continue to demand that Hamas accept the basic responsibilities of peace: recognizing Israel's right to exist, rejecting violence, and adhering to all existing agreements.¹⁸

Obama then attempted to place his views squarely within mainstream US positions over decades and to clarify exactly what his administration's position was in regard to a future settlement fair to both sides:

There was nothing particularly original in my proposal; this basic framework for negotiations has long been the basis for discussions among the parties, including previous US administrations. But since questions have been raised, let me repeat what I actually said on Thursday.

I said that the United States believes that negotiations should result in two states, with permanent Palestinian borders with Israel, Jordan, and Egypt, and permanent Israeli borders with Palestine. The borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps, so that secure and recognized borders are established for both states. The Palestinian people must have the right to govern themselves, and reach their potential, in a sovereign and contiguous state.

As for security, every state has the right to self-defense, and Israel must be able to defend itself – by itself – against any threat. Provisions must also be robust enough to prevent a resurgence of terrorism; to stop the infiltration of weapons; and to provide effective border security. The full and phased withdrawal of Israeli military forces should be coordinated with the assumption of Palestinian security responsibility in a sovereign, non-militarized state. The duration of this transition period must be agreed, and the effectiveness of security arrangements must be demonstrated.

That is what I said. Now, it was my reference to the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps that received the lion's share of the attention. And since my position has been misrepresented several times, let me reaffirm what "1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps" means.

By definition, it means that the parties themselves – Israelis and Palestinians – will negotiate a border that is different than the one that existed on June 4, 1967. It is a well known formula to all who have worked on this issue for a generation. It allows the parties themselves to account for the changes that have taken place over the last 44 years, including the new demographic realities on the ground and the needs of both sides. The ultimate goal is two states for two peoples. Israel as a Jewish state and the homeland for the Jewish people, and the state of Palestine as the homeland for the Palestinian people; each state enjoying self-determination, mutual recognition, and peace.

If there's a controversy, then, it's not based in substance. What I did on Thursday was to say publicly what has long been acknowledged privately. I have done so because we cannot afford to wait another decade, or another two decades, or another three decades, to achieve peace. The world is moving too fast. The extraordinary challenges facing Israel would only grow. Delay will undermine Israel's security and the peace that the Israeli people deserve.¹⁹

But to Israel's strongest supporters, the president's speech presented a number of serious problems. Obama gave no indication that he would cut off financial aid to the new Fatah-Hamas unity government and never even mentioned the issue of the historic right of return of Palestinians. Nor did the president reiterate specifically the necessity of an Israeli military presence in the Jordan Valley. In effect, and perhaps in intention too, Obama underscored rather than downplayed the obvious fact that the United States had major differences with Israel – albeit differences between erstwhile “friends.” Two elements here were especially troubling to supporters of Israel.

First, absent in the president's address was an explanation for his prior statement in his May 19, 2011 address that it was now official US policy to press for a peace-deal based on 1967 lines, accompanied by land swaps. Obama's immediate predecessors in the White House, presidents Clinton and Bush, had deliberately and consistently refused to refer to the 1967 borders. The Clinton Parameters, which were withdrawn by the president before he left office, while referring to land “swaps and other territorial arrangement,” did not expressly mention the 1967 borders. Bush's April 2004 letter to then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon – endorsed by both houses of Congress – referred to both parties having to agree to any swaps of territory, and had declared that “in light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centres, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949, and all previous efforts to negotiate a two-state solution have reached the same conclusion.” Bush also wrote that “an agreed, just, fair, and realistic framework for a solution to the Palestinian refugee issue as part of any final status agreement will need to be found through the establishment of a Palestinian state, and the settling of Palestinian refugees there, rather than in Israel.” President Obama's failure to restate these positions inevitably struck many Israelis as a dangerous shift in the US approach.

But perhaps the central contradiction in the president's position was the claim that Israel could not be expected to negotiate with those who want to destroy it – but that, simultaneously, negotiations nonetheless needed to resume. In this, as in other aspects of its approach to the Middle East more generally, the Obama administration's efforts hardly amounted to a clear, well-conceived or coherent strategy. The release in January 2011 by *Al Jazeera* of records of prior negotiations between the two sides – the so-called “Palestine Papers” – showed that, in 2008, Palestinian negotiators had in fact been prepared to give up nearly all of East Jerusalem and to accept many Israeli settlements to be included within Israel's final borders, in exchange for land swaps with Palestinian majorities within the 1949 armistice lines. But even these offers were scorned by the Olmert government. Such revelations produced vituperative Arab reactions towards Abbas, severely undermining his credibility as a leader and indicating the resistance of many Palestinians to the compromises a two-state solution would require.

Moreover, Obama failed to reiterate the official position adopted by previous administrations that rejected the prospects of a right of return which would demographically overwhelm the state of Israel. In so doing, Obama effectively created a hardened prerequisite position on the part of the Palestinians before entering negotiations. As the former Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, responded after the speech, unless and until Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu accepts the 1967 lines as a territorial basis for a Palestinian state, there would be no negotiations. The willingness of the Obama administration for Israel to withdraw to the 1967 borders in the absence of negotiations precluded the need for Fatah and Hamas to declare an end to the conflict. The effect of Obama's shifting away from the post-Oslo accords approach of Clinton and Bush, and for many Israelis the clear presidential intent as well, was actively to seek to isolate Israel at the same time that the Palestinians' own position was ever more emboldened. As Benny Morris, the Israeli historian, observed:

Abbas is now pursuing a Palestinian state without having to pay the price of recognizing Israel or making peace. Once the Palestinians get their West Bank-Gaza state, they will use it as a springboard for their second-stage assault, political and military, on Israel and they will no doubt lodge claims "at the United Nations, human rights treaty bodies, and the International Court of Justice" as part of that assault. But the major basis of political and moral assault on Israel will be the Palestinian demand for a "Right of Return" and its international acceptance and implementation of the 1948 refugees, who now number, them and their descendants, 5–6 million souls ... the refugee problem will need to be resolved "justly" on the basis of UN General Assembly resolution 194, of December 1948, which, in the Palestinian interpretation, endorses the "Right of Return." If the world accepts this Palestinian demand and there is implementation, Israel will cease to exist (Israel's current population consists of close to 6 million Jews and 1.4 million Arabs: Add to it 5–6 million Palestinian refugees and the country will have an Arab, not a Jewish, majority. Ergo, no Jewish state.).²⁰

In such light, it was hardly surprising that Netanyahu should exploit the situation to pressure Obama further. In his May 2011 speech to AIPAC, and again in an address to a joint session of Congress during the same D.C. visit – during which he received no fewer than twenty-nine standing ovations – the Israeli premier flatly rejected the 1967 parameters as "indefensible" and a non-starter. Such rejection suggested strongly to the White House that, contrary to his recent and grudging acceptance of the two-state concept, the prime minister was not remotely sincere in his commitment to such a solution: to Obama, Netanyahu was an ideologue rather than the pragmatist he claimed to be.

In retrospect, the Obama administration's approach promised little in terms of convincing a distrustful, and an increasingly wary, Israeli mass public that it would genuinely deliver permanent peace and enduring security for the Jewish state. For foreign policy "realists" and his critics on the left alike, Obama's cardinal error was to maintain a fundamental continuity with his predecessors: not exerting sufficient pressure on Tel Aviv; adhering stubbornly to the maxim

of not negotiating with Hamas and other militant groups; continuing to wield US power in the United Nations – as he did in February 2011 to veto a Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements – to thwart efforts to censure Israel and assist the Palestinians to statehood; cutting off US funding to UNESCO once it recognized the Palestinian Authority as a member of the body in October 2011; and failing to propose a comprehensive peace settlement of his own to cut through the Israeli and Palestinian feuding and posturing. As the settlements grew and the prospect of a Palestinian state receded square mile by square mile, Washington's posture as an honest broker appeared increasingly hollow.

Castigating Obama for backtracking on foreign affairs generally, former president Jimmy Carter argued that, "When he said no more settlements, that was a major step forward. But then he backed away from that, as he's backed away from all of his other demands."²¹ The inability of the administration to either persuade or cajole Netanyahu into serious concessions generated intense and widespread frustration. As Jeffrey Goldberg recalled, to senior figures in the Obama administration – including the president – the Israeli PM's self-destructive behavior during his Washington visit (arranged by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, John Boehner) in May 2011 was "something to behold":

In a meeting of the National Security Council Principals Committee held not long before his retirement this summer, Gates coldly laid out the many steps the administration has taken to guarantee Israel's security – access to top-quality weapons, assistance developing missile-defense systems, high-level intelligence sharing – and then stated bluntly that the US has received nothing in return, particularly with regard to the peace process. Senior administration officials told me that Gates argued to the president directly that Netanyahu is not only ungrateful, but also endangering his country by refusing to grapple with Israel's growing isolation and with the demographic challenges it faces if it keeps control of the West Bank. According to these sources, Gates's analysis met with no resistance from other members of the committee.²²

For others, though, Obama's central failing was to push the Israelis too far and too fast towards profoundly risky deals that ultimately promised more, not less, conflict: insisting for the first time in public by any US president that Israel retreat to its pre-1967 borders; refusing to note that existing settlements had to be acknowledged by Palestinian interlocutors; demanding the withdrawal of Israeli security forces from the Jordan River; and rejecting a unilateral Palestinian approach to the UN while effectively encouraging rather than hindering such efforts by enabling the Palestinians to invoke the authority of the US president to reject even entering negotiations. As Khaled Elgindy observed:

Having identified Palestinian statehood as a vital national security interest, Washington would again be in the awkward position of voting down its own

stated policy if it actively worked to prevent or defeat the UN vote, particularly at such a sensitive moment in this history of the Middle East.²³

Ironically, an administration that attempted to demonstrate its even-handedness and honest broker role ultimately encouraged both sides in the conflict to harden rather than soften their positions. With the Palestinian bid for statehood at the UN threatening to internationalize the conflict and galvanize Palestinian anger further, while pushing the US Congress to cut off aid and Israel to abrogate previous agreements with the Palestinians in reprisal, the prospects for conflict were on the rise, while those for peace appeared minimal: a fig-leaf rather than an olive branch. Such an unfortunate development was exacerbated by the popular uprisings that convulsed the Arab world through 2011, the strategic implications of which placed important new pressures on both the US and Israel, making the latter's occupation even less tenable in the longer term in the face of newly unstable and antipathetic neighbors.

The Arab spring: the inevitable surprise

Although Obama's Cairo address of June 2009 had walked a difficult tightrope between reaffirming American ideals and sustaining a hard-headed *realpolitik* calculation of US interests in the region, the events of 2011 posed a fundamental challenge to Washington's traditional approach to the Middle East. Part of Obama's efforts to repair relations with the Muslim world required a deliberate and methodical distancing of Washington from the ambitious, idealistic and – for many in the region – quasi-imperial elements of George W. Bush's "freedom agenda." This was not only a matter of winding-down the US presence in Iraq and eschewing overt talk of military action against Iran, but also relegating the question of democracy promotion and human rights to, at best, a second order priority. Not only were references to democracy notably few in Obama's public diplomacy during 2009–10, but his administration moved early on to cut the foreign assistance budgets directed to promoting democratic reform. Diplomacy and development instead assumed a predominant role in the Obama administration's plans for the Middle East.

In many respects Obama's initial approach appeared, as in other regions, to represent something of a return to normalcy after the apparent aberration of the Bush years and, especially, the Bush first term that had so convulsed the region and generated such worldwide antipathy. In relation to the twenty-two states of the Arab League, this meant a pragmatic case-by-case approach: shoring-up relations with traditional US allies such as Hosni Mubarak and King Abdullah; forging tentative steps towards engaging oppositionist states such as Bashar al-Assad's Syria; developing closer ties with Yemen's President Saleh in order to contain the serious and growing threat of al Qaeda in the

Arabian Peninsula; and extending reassurance to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council states in order to sustain an effective anti-Iranian coalition of Sunni-majority or Sunni-led states without formally framing an explicit strategy of containment against Tehran. In order to do this, Obama zealously avoided the kind of public and private emphasis devoted by the Bush administration to pressing for democratizing and liberalizing reforms, cutting the democracy promotion budget to Egypt by half in 2009–10, and instead repeatedly stressing a desire for a new beginning between the US and Muslims worldwide.

Even prior to 2011, the probable returns to such an approach appeared relatively modest. But the remarkable developments of late 2010–11 cast Obama's strategy strongly into question. Beginning with the self-immolation of a twenty-six-year old Tunisian fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire on December 17, 2011 out of frustration and despair with the state's widespread corruption, a wave of mass protests erupted and swept spontaneously across several Arab states in North Africa and the Gulf. For optimists, the Arab Spring promised the greatest advance for human rights, freedom and democratic values since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the end of the Cold War. Moreover, no more forceful and eloquent a rejection of al Qaeda's discredited "clash of civilizations" narrative could have been imagined than Arabs and Muslims in their tens of thousands peacefully protesting for universal rights, education and jobs.

For sceptics, however, the uprisings presaged a dangerous and unpredictable turn of events with potentially disastrous consequences for the region, US and Western interests, and the wider world. Lacking firm democratic foundations, elections in and of themselves did not promise to transform traditionally authoritarian Arab states into either genuine pluralist polities or peaceful neighbors. In addition, as Daniel Byman summarized US strategic calculations succinctly, "Arab tyranny has often served US purposes,"²⁴ from assisting military interventions, intelligence collection and covert operations to facilitating post-9/11 counter-terrorism policies. The vacuums left by the removal of corrupt but long-standing autocratic rulers such as Mubarak, Saleh, Qaddafi and, potentially, even Assad was ripe for exploitation by Islamist groups of various hues. While the demands for open government, action against corruption and nepotism, and greater political participation reflected genuine aspirations shared by peoples around the globe, the fragility of the fluid situation threatened a collapse into even more authoritarian regimes, increased violent conflict and a possible spread of terrorism. Finally, as the Saudis made vehemently clear to Washington, the abandonment of long-term US allies set a worrying precedent for other "pro-US" autocrats who might encounter a similar popular fate.

In the light of such competing strategic considerations, the Obama administration's response was somewhat uncertain, and not until his major

Middle East speech of May 19, 2011 did the president outline a clear set of strategic goals for the region as a whole, after a period of what Philip Stephens termed “sustained and intense dithering.”²⁵ In part, this reflected the basic difficulty – faced by Bush previously – of how best to calibrate a comprehensive strategy when the priorities, preferences, and value to the US of the various actors in distinct national dramas differed so dramatically. Partly, as Shadi Hamid notes,²⁶ the uncertainty also stemmed from “the Islamist dilemma” that had effectively paralyzed US policy for decades: how can the US successfully promote democracy in the region without risking bringing Islamists to power? Partly, as the head of one influential Arab American organization put it, the dynamics within the administration also had an important role to play: “Obama ‘gets it,’ but some old hands such as Dennis Ross, along with Hillary Clinton, are hampering his finding a new way forward.”²⁷

But, in addition, the administration’s calculations reflected a new and important dynamic that was especially volatile. As Michael Scott Doran observed, “After a long absence, a strategic player has returned to the Middle Eastern stage: the people.”²⁸ Such a presence offered a positive strategic contribution inasmuch as the uprisings from Tunisia to Syria were – for once in the Middle East – manifestly not about America. Driven by grievances both economic (unemployment, poverty, corruption) and political (the absence of freedom, accountability and popular participation in government), the mass protests saw almost no burnings of the Stars and Stripes or even references to Obama or the US. But the widespread cries for justice and dignity by the Arab protestors also served as forceful reminders to Washington that America’s interests in the region were not theirs. Characteristically hedging, as Ryan Lizza remarked, “Obama’s instinct was to try to have it both ways,” his ultimate position being “to talk like an idealist while acting like a realist.”²⁹

Egypt

The most important case, in terms of the region as a whole as well as US interests, was Egypt – home to half of the world’s Arabs. For three decades after the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981, Egypt had represented a strategic pivot for the region. Mubarak had maintained a close and steadfast alliance with the US, assisted by approximately \$1.5 billion in annual American aid. Assisting in the interrogation and elimination of Islamist terrorists, Mubarak had also presided over a cold-but-durable peace with Israel, honoring the 1979 peace treaty between the two states and closing the border with Gaza after Hamas gained power there in 2006. Triggered by the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, eighteen days of mass protests from January 25 to February 11, 2011 finally, and ignominiously, forced the country’s president of thirty years from power. As Dina Shehata notes, it was a potent combination of increasing corruption and economic exclusion, an

alienated and large youthful population, and the rigged 2010 parliamentary elections and divisions among the Egyptian elite over Mubarak's successor that underpinned the successful protests.³⁰ Ultimately, it was "the unity of the opposition and broad-based popular mobilization that forced the military to oust Mubarak"³¹ from power.

What this meant for the long-term interests of the US – whose strong military-to-military contacts helped convince the Egyptian military to oust one of their own from power – remains unclear. While elite relationships between the two governments and militaries were close, Egyptian public opinion is overwhelmingly hostile to the US. In a 2010 Pew global survey, for example, only 17 percent of Egyptians expressed a favorable view of the US, which tied with Pakistan and Turkey for the lowest rating in any of twenty-one countries. Almost three-quarters of Egyptians opposed US anti-terrorism efforts and four-fifths wanted the US to withdraw from Afghanistan. Attitudes to Israel among Egyptians are even more vehement. In a 2007 Pew survey, for example, 80 percent of Egyptians agreed that the needs of the Palestinian people could never be met as long as Israel exists; only 18 percent said that the two societies could co-exist fairly. According to Edward Walker, US Ambassador to Egypt under President Bill Clinton, "Of all the countries in the Middle East the population of Egypt is the most hostile to Israel."³² Egypt's decision to open the border with Gaza in June 2011 – which in turn resulted in attacks by Islamists on Israelis in August 2011 – represented, to Benny Morris, "a definite move away from the spirit of non-belligerency."³³ The ransacking of the Israeli Embassy in Cairo, on September 9, 2011, augured badly for the maintenance of the two countries' three-decade-old "cold peace," much as the attacks on Coptic Christians demonstrating in Cairo in November 2011 – resulting in twenty-five deaths – augured badly for religious tolerance.

Admittedly, some regional analysts remained sanguine about the impact of such popular attitudes on a democratically elected Egyptian government. Aaron David Miller, for example, notes that "It's not in Egypt's political, economic or security interest" to renounce the Israeli peace treaty and the \$1 billion of annual US security assistance that comes with it.³⁴ Middle East expert Kenneth Pollack similarly argues that "a stable Egyptian democracy" would probably calculate that "its interests are best served by peace with Israel, being part of the global economy ... and maintaining a good relationship with the United States."³⁵ But other observers, fearing either greater Islamist influence in government through the well-organized Muslim Brotherhood and fellow Islamists, a return to a military dictatorship, or some hybrid deal between the Islamists and the military, are less optimistic. Henry Kissinger, for example, was not only critical of the rapid abandonment of Mubarak by Washington ("When you are associated with an individual for 30 years, you do not just throw him over the side as if relationships have no meaning. Not that we owed him ten years in office, but that we owed him a graceful exit."³⁶),

but also rightly cautious about the consequences of a precipitate handover of power in Cairo for both the US and the protesters in Tahrir Square: with a more managed departure and a negotiated handover of power, “The Facebook and Google crowd would have been better off than now, where they are being marginalized by the Army and the Muslim Brotherhood.”³⁷

Libya

If Egypt was the most important, the starkest case of regime change involved Libya. Colonel Qaddafi had enjoyed a partial, albeit hesitant, return to the international community after his decision to abandon his support for international terrorism and his weapons of mass destruction programs in 2003. But an upsurge of popular protests at his autocratic forty-two years of eccentric rule, beginning in February 2011, threatened to end his regime. As Qaddafi’s forces advanced on the rebel stronghold of Benghazi, the United Nations – for the first time in its sixty-six years – authorized military action to prevent an “imminent massacre.” UN Security Council Resolution 1973, passed on 17 March by a vote of 10–0 (with abstentions by Brazil, China, Germany, India and Russia), authorized “all necessary measures” to protect civilians, excluding ground occupation, and established a no-fly zone over Libyan airspace as well as sanctions. After committing US forces to the operation on March 19, Obama emphasized that the US would play a supporting role once NATO took command, which it did on April 4. The US contribution to NATO operations included intelligence, jamming of communications, surveillance by unmanned aircraft, aerial refuelling, logistical support and search and rescue. But having used cruise missiles to destroy much of Qaddafi’s anti-aircraft capability at the war’s start, the Pentagon stunned allies by refusing to engage in direct combat and not deploying aircraft to attack the regime’s military assets. Obama said Libya would be better off with Qaddafi out of power and that he “embraced that goal.” But he added that “broadening our military mission to include regime change would be a mistake.”

It was not a surprise that President Obama should expect Europe to take a leading role in dealing with a crisis such as Libya’s, since he had argued during the 2008 campaign that Europe should assume greater responsibility for its own backyard. From the outset of his tenure, he insisted that a post-Bush United States would not rush to intervene unilaterally in crises, would seek to mobilize the international community, would partner with regional actors and would prioritize multilateralism. Theoretically, then, either the EU or NATO’s European members should have been the appropriate leaders through which to tackle the Libyan crisis – perhaps in conjunction with bodies such as the African Union, the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

Once more the president found his cautious and carefully calibrated approach yielding the worst of all worlds. The extended discussions within

the administration – with Gates strongly opposed to US participation and Clinton, Susan Rice and Samantha Power supportive – caused critics to charge Obama with “dithering” once again and failing to appreciate the urgency of the need for humanitarian intervention. The reluctance to intervene, and the emphasis upon the US role being modest, likewise attracted charges of a failure of US leadership. Simultaneously, however, the ultimate willingness to participate in the effort to protect Libyan civilians – particularly in the light of the fundamental logistical and political problems that plagued the European NATO members’ ability to wage an effective campaign – raised criticisms that the US under Obama was leading (albeit, once more, “from behind”) the third military intervention in a Muslim nation in ten years. Moreover, while the UN resolution was carefully worded to stress a carefully limited humanitarian role, its studied ambiguities implied that the ultimate goal of the coalition was regime change (a subtlety that was lent credence by NATO pursuing against Qaddafi, in effect, the second-longest targeted assassination campaign in history, after that of Cuba’s Fidel Castro). Far from vindicating his status as the “un-Bush,” the Arab Spring seemed instead to confirm Obama as, depending on the viewpoint, either a kinder, gentler version of his Texan predecessor, a more insidious version promising better relations in speeches but failing to deliver in substance (the true manifestation of the master seducer, the “Great Satan”), or a hopelessly ineffective leader – “inaction man” – unable to achieve the rather modest reforms he sought to achieve.

When the forces of the National Transitional Council – recognized as the legitimate authority by the UK, France and other states early in the conflict – finally took control of Tripoli in the last week of August 2011, Libya appeared another foreign policy success for the Obama administration. E. J. Dionne, noting that Obama “can’t win for winning in Libya,” claimed, “It’s remarkable how reluctant Obama’s opponents are to acknowledge that despite all the predictions that his policy of limited engagement could never work, it actually did.”³⁸ One of the world’s longest serving dictators had been ousted after forty-two years in power, with not a single loss of American life, no US ground troops present in Libya, and a coalition operation led by NATO but with prior UN authorization and active Arab support (especially from Qatar and the UAE). Anne-Marie Slaughter, Director of Policy Planning in the Obama State Department from 2009–11, claimed Libya as vindication of Obama’s approach and the West being able to make the “tough choices of foreign policy in the 21st century”:

... the depiction of America “leading from behind” makes no sense. In a multi-power world with problems that are too great for any state to take on alone, effective leadership must come from the centre. Central players mobilise others and create the conditions and coalitions for action – just as President Barack Obama described America’s role in this conflict. In truth, US diplomacy has been adroit in enabling action from other powers in the region, and then knowing when to step out of the way.³⁹

But such an analysis – and the rather strained claim that US intervention stemmed from its “strategic interest to help social revolutions fighting for the values we espouse and proclaim”⁴⁰ – obscured two more salient aspects.

First, the Libyan campaign illustrated less the viability of “enabling” coalitions of the willing – a concept that Obama had previously repudiated in favor of renewing established alliances – than the graphic limits of such an approach. Only nine NATO nations deployed aircraft to attack ground targets. Turkey and Spain simply refused to attack ground targets, key NATO members such as Germany and Poland offered nothing at all to the operation, while at one stage France and the UK were perilously close to running out of munitions. American assistance remained crucial. As the European contribution to ISAF – one more symbolic of transatlantic comity than the outcome of a genuine sense of shared threat – became even more limited in the face of the US troop surge and the Afghan operation’s increasing unpopularity, Secretary Gates had lamented Europe’s “demilitarization” as “an impediment to achieving real security and lasting peace,” in a speech at the National Defense University in February 2010.⁴¹ In a valedictory address in June 2011, a clearly exasperated Gates made clear that a NATO “alliance” where the US contribution had actually increased from 50 percent of total defense spending in 2001 to 75 percent in 2011 was profoundly imbalanced.⁴² While the assistance of Qatar and the UAE was crucial to preparing the rebels’ armed forces, the mission represented not a coherent alliance operation but a quintessential “coalition of the willing.” Far from confirming the “enabling” role of the US, it reconfirmed the operational and diplomatic strains in the transatlantic alliance – Europe lacking both the will and the means to carry out a limited mission, and American technical and logistical resources remaining central to NATO’s success.

Second, as in the Clinton interventions of the 1990s – and unlike the Bush ones of the 2000s – US participation occurred without the authorization of the US Congress. In a series of votes, the administration failed to secure approval from Congress, with the opposition to the operation receiving bipartisan backing.⁴³ As such, Libya indicated less a model for Washington’s post-American diplomatic and military blueprint than confirmation of a disturbingly inward-looking, uncertain and war-weary nation.

The administration’s mixed messages and indecision about Libya’s revolution in March confused allies as well as powers hostile to intervention, such as China and Russia. The legal mismatch between the goal of removing Qaddafi and the narrower mandate of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 led to bipartisan condemnation of the administration’s actions by Congress. The administration decision to limit its involvement several weeks into the conflict caused cash-strapped European governments to run short on ammunition and scramble to effectively deploy their limited military resources. A more robust use of American force during this initial period, including greater use of ground-attack aircraft such as AC-130s and A-10s, could have crippled

Qaddafi's forces at the onset. The president's declaration that there would not be any American boots on the ground left allied special forces on their own to assist the untrained rebel forces and guide NATO air strikes. The participation of US special operators would have undoubtedly put the alliance in a stronger position to pressure Qaddafi. All of these actions allowed Qaddafi to stay in power for months longer than necessary, resulting in countless unnecessary deaths.

Moreover, while President Obama called for Qaddafi to go on March 3, it was not until July 15 that the United States officially recognized the Transitional National Council (TNC) as Libya's legitimate governing authority. Doing so earlier might have bolstered the TNC's international credibility and led to an earlier resolution of the effort to allow frozen Qaddafi assets to be handed over to them. Apart from his initial address to the nation on March 28, the president made very little effort to explain the strategic rationale of the Libyan operation to a doubtful Congress and American public. The standoff reached its nadir in late June when, in a bizarre echo of the congressional opposition to Bill Clinton's intervention in Kosovo in 1999, the House of Representatives voted not to authorize the operations in Libya but refused to cut off funding. While the actual impact of those votes was negligible, the dubious message being sent to friends and foes alike was one of waning American resolve. As one commentary concluded, "For the foreseeable future, political resistance will meet any suggestion of new foreign missions for the US military."⁴⁴ In sum, rather than offering emphatic support to a strategy of "leading from behind," Libya represented a mostly pyrrhic victory for the Obama administration.

Syria

The traditional charge against US foreign policy of American double standards also found powerful echoes in the contrasting US responses to Libya and other Middle Eastern states where authoritarian powers resorted to violent force to repress popular protests during the Arab Uprising. Aside from Saudi Arabia, whose ruling family managed to quell popular disturbances quickly through a combination of bribery and repression, the most notable instance in this regard was Syria. As part of its broader approach of strategic engagement, the Obama administration (like Bill Clinton previously in the 1990s) had attempted a *rapprochement* with Damascus, premised on the notion that Syria could be persuaded to assist in an Israeli-Palestinian peace process and be lured away from its ominous "resistance" alliance with Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas. This engagement included enlisting Senator John Kerry (D-MA), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to meet directly with Assad, and resuming full diplomatic relations with a US ambassador, Robert Ford, in place from January 2010, in an attempt to encourage the regime to develop a more constructive role in the region (especially in relation to Israel, Lebanon and Iraq).

The Assad regime's response to the outbreak of popular demonstrations in the summer of 2011 was brutal (and rumored to be orchestrated with Iranian assistance from the *Quds* force), with some 2,000 civilian deaths estimated by the fall of 2011, but the Obama administration's reaction was typically muted. As even the reliably liberal *Washington Post* noted, in an acerbic but penetrating editorial:

Massacres on this scale usually prompt a strong response from Western democracies, as they should. Ambassadors are withdrawn; resolutions are introduced at the U.N. Security Council; international investigations are mounted and sanctions applied. In Syria's case, none of this has happened. The Obama administration has denounced the violence – a presidential statement called Friday's acts of repression "outrageous" – but otherwise remained passive. Even the ambassador it dispatched to Damascus during a congressional recess last year remains on post. The administration has sat on its hands despite the fact that the Assad regime is one of the most implacable US adversaries in the Middle East. It is Iran's closest ally; it supplies Iranian weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip for use against Israel. Since 2003 it has helped thousands of jihadists from across the Arab world travel to Iraq to attack American soldiers. It sought to build a secret nuclear reactor with the help of North Korea and destabilized the pro-Western government of neighboring Lebanon by sponsoring a series of assassinations. Yet the Obama administration has effectively sided with the regime against the protesters. Rather than repudiate Mr. Assad and take tangible steps to weaken his regime, it has proposed, with increasing implausibility, that his government "implement meaningful reforms," as the president's latest statement put it ... the administration, which made the "engagement" of Syria a key part of its Middle East policy, still clings to the belief that Mr. Assad could be part of a Middle East peace process; and it would rather not trade "a known quantity in Assad for an unknown future." As a practical matter, these considerations are misguided. Even if his massacres allow him to survive in power, Mr. Assad will hardly be a credible partner for Israel. And no matter what happens, Syria will not return to the police-state stability it has known during the past several decades. As a moral matter, the stance of the United States is shameful. To stand by passively while hundreds of people seeking freedom are gunned down by their government makes a mockery of the US commitment to human rights. In recent months President Obama has pledged repeatedly that he would support the aspiration of Arabs for greater freedom. In Syria, he has not kept his word.⁴⁵

That administration stance ultimately altered in tentative ways during the summer of 2011. In a curious echo of then Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice's, 2005 Cairo speech that had insisted that the US would no longer accept autocracy as the price for stability, Obama's May 19, 2011 speech at the State Department finally declared democratic reform to be the formal US policy priority in the Middle East. Stating that "Strategies of repression and diversion won't work any more ... Change cannot be denied," and affirming that, "After decades of accepting the world as it is in the region, we have a chance to pursue the world as it should be," Obama publicly faulted Bahrain, Yemen and Syria for failing to respond adequately to the mass calls for change while

expressing confidence that Qaddafi would step down or be forced from power. After imposing a new round of sanctions on Assad and other members of his Allawite regime the previous day, the president also declared that, "The Syrian people have shown their courage in demanding a transition to democracy. President Assad now has a choice: He can lead that transition, or get out of the way." Although confirming the US would pursue its interests in the region, such as energy security and nuclear non-proliferation, Obama noted that "failure to speak to the broader aspirations of ordinary people will only feed the suspicion that has festered for years that the US pursues our own interests at their expense." Referring to political and economic reform and human rights, the president declared that "Our support for these principles is not a secondary interest. Today I am making it clear that it is a top priority that must be translated into concrete actions, and supported by all of the diplomatic, economic and strategic tools at our disposal." Announcing plans to forgive up to \$1 billion in Egyptian debt and extend loan guarantees of up to \$1 billion to Cairo, the president sought to incentivize Arab reformers elsewhere for similar results. While one of the US's strongest "allies" in the region, Saudi Arabia, went entirely unmentioned in the address, Obama was emphatic that "A failure to change our approach threatens a deepening spiral of division between the US and the Arab world."⁴⁶

Not until August 2011, however, did the Obama administration's softly-softly approach to Syria finally undergo a Damascene conversion and issue an unequivocal demand, coordinated with the UK, France and Germany, for Assad to step down – Obama declaring that "For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside." Announcing a new round of targeted sanctions, freezing all Syrian assets within US jurisdiction and barring Americans from business dealings with the government in Damascus (including prohibitions from exporting or importing oil), Obama nonetheless explicitly ruled out military intervention: "The United States cannot and will not impose this transition on Syria. We have heard their strong desire that there not be foreign intervention."⁴⁷ Although Syria represented more of a strategic interest for the US than Libya – and much more of a consistent threat to US interests over several decades – Washington's hopes for decisive pressure to work still rested on European governments, on whom 90–95 percent of Syria's oil exports relied, themselves taking decisive action to impose sanctions on the regime. On September 2, 2011, the EU adopted a ban on imports of Syrian crude oil, to take effect from November 15.⁴⁸ But the *volte face* of the Obama administration lent little in the way of coherence to its overall stance. As Hillary Clinton had declared, in the week prior to Obama's demand for regime change, "If the US called for Mr Assad's head, then what?"⁴⁹

It remains to be seen whether in substantive terms this new commitment to reform and regime change represented a genuine refutation of the notion that "the United States remains a status quo power in a region undergoing

Table 6.1 Muslim views of Obama's handling of Middle East issues (percentages approving [A] and disapproving [D])

	Calls for political change							
	The Middle East		Israel-Palestine		Afghanistan		Iran	
	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D
Turkey	8	65	6	68	5	70	5	68
Egypt	45	52	15	82	18	76	27	68
Jordan	31	65	17	82	12	87	21	77
Lebanon	41	52	12	85	23	71	40	55
Palestinian Territories	33	63	13	84	15	81	16	80
Indonesia	30	49	26	57	28	56	23	56
Pakistan	5	40	6	45	9	52	10	50

Source: Pew Research Center, Q79b-e, Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Obama's Challenge in the Muslim World: Arab Spring Fails to Improve US Image*, May 17, 2011, 11.

radical change.”⁵⁰ From the American side, not only does Obama confront significant congressional opposition to his policies towards the region and a deep partisan divide, but in an environment of stringent economic constraints and deficient US demand, the prospects for extending serious economic and financial assistance to liberalizing Arab states appeared slim. Moreover, as Table 6.1 confirms, substantial scepticism born of a long history of US double standards still informs mass opinion towards Washington across the Middle East. As James Zogby observed, while Obama's Cairo speech of 2009 was very effective as a public address, “... Arab hopes were deflated by the lack of change” subsequently.⁵¹ The possibility that successful uprisings conclude with a ransacking of government offices, only to discover the extent of US complicity with prior authoritarian rulers and their repressive methods, also stores up potentially explosive medium-term consequences for Washington's relations with states across the region.⁵²

Much as with other aspects of his foreign and domestic policy, Obama's attempts to balance competing interests and attend to the complexities of the challenges posed by the Arab Spring ultimately satisfied few. Instinctively conservative and incremental in his approach, and predisposed to splitting the difference when confronted by tough choices, the administration's policy effectively emerged in bifurcated fashion, emphasizing democracy in North Africa but stability in the Gulf. But, as a Pew Research Center study documented – released in May 2011, in the same week that the president made his major Middle East

strategy address – Obama’s hesitant and selectively calibrated response had, in conjunction with other US foreign and national security policies, largely undone whatever limited goodwill and cautious optimism had been earned by his 2009 Cairo speech and other outreach efforts that had sought to restore America’s abysmal moral authority among Muslims.⁵³ Significantly, this was not only a matter of US favorability ratings continuing to crater across the region, but also of declining Muslim confidence in Obama personally, dwindling support for US actions under his leadership, and increasing conviction across the Muslim world that their own governments cooperated too much with Washington. Together the findings starkly demonstrated continuing and marked hostility to the US, whose stock could barely fall lower in the region. For a post-American grand strategy, there appeared to be as much despair and misgivings as “hope” in Washington’s complex relationship with the Middle East, from Tunis to Tehran.

Conclusion: the limits of strategic engagement in the Middle East

In contrast to those who worry that the ousting of Mubarak from Egypt may represent a blow to US interests as significant as the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979, Marc Lynch argues that – while Obama’s approach to the popular uprisings satisfied almost no-one – his cautious and Egypt-centric response “worked,” at least within certain narrow parameters and in the short term.⁵⁴ But as the results of the November 2011 Egyptian parliamentary elections demonstrated, positive medium and long-term results for Washington remained highly doubtful. Whether, moreover, Obama’s highly selective strategy of support for self-determination “worked” more broadly across the region remains even more questionable. Indeed, whether any conceivable comprehensive effort from Washington could do so is a question worth asking. Perhaps, as Adam Kushner suggested – reflecting on the failure of both realist and idealist approaches to the Middle East under successive US administrations – “... the true mistake in the Middle East has not been getting the policy (or the means) wrong: it has been assuming we could ever get it right.” In the messy real world, especially today, there may be “no disgrace in muddling through when there is no alternative” since “the best that American policymakers can do is labor at the margins and react to unforeseen events”⁵⁵ – a singularly un-heroic but eminently sensible summary of the Obama record thus far.

In many respects, the destabilizing Arab Spring only served once more to underline the necessity for, but absence of, robust American leadership in world affairs and presidential leadership at home and abroad. Both were sorely lacking. For an administration so committed to engagement, its approach appeared quixotically disengaged and the Arab Awakening ultimately underscored the sharp limits to Washington’s ability even to

anticipate – much less to dictate or control – events of seismic strategic consequence; not, admittedly, for the first time. To the extent that popular sentiments are now more accurately represented and reflected in the corridors of Arab power, the US and its allies – in particular an increasingly isolated and threatened Israel – face a more conflictual, and even adversarial, set of relations with several key regional actors. Moreover, the very absence of clear and unequivocal public US support for popular change – at least until Obama's May 19, 2011 speech – that had helped to convince some Arab rulers not to quit threatened to exacerbate the longer-term legacy of popular antipathy towards Washington in newly empowered governments and among the 60 percent of Middle Eastern populations under thirty years of age.

The Obama administration will almost certainly be forced in future “to take more into account the views and interests of empowered Arab publics who have conclusively and profoundly rejected the status quo upon which American grand strategy has been based.”⁵⁶ Although Israel and Palestine barely figured in the Arab revolts, much less constituting catalytic drivers of the uprisings, the sudden removal of “moderate” Sunni regimes and the burgeoning regional roles of Turkey and Egypt also make the prospect of a genuine and lasting resolution of an Israeli-Palestinian peace more rather than less distant. Such an “un-heroic” style of US leadership may have ultimately been the outcome of a series of unpalatable choices facing Washington but it also, as Lynch rightly observes, chimed well with the Obama administration's conservative – in the sense of prudently cautious – foreign policy DNA. Nonetheless, in making an already complex situation still more complicated, as Aaron David Miller argued:

Thirty months in, a self-styled transformative president with big ideas and ambitions as a peacemaker finds himself with no negotiations, no peace process, no relationship with an Israeli prime minister, no traction with Palestinians, and no strategy to achieve a breakthrough.⁵⁷

The marked irony was that America's value to Arabs stemmed in large part from its influence on Israel, and likewise its value to Israel relied in part on its salience to Arab governments. But by 2012, Washington's value to both parties was much reduced, with Obama's resistance to involving the UN centrally on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict running directly against his oft-touted claims that America could not solve international challenges alone.

As with other priorities in Obama's attempt to craft a post-American foreign policy, the president could not be faulted for making a sincere and serious effort to change the diplomatic landscape in order to reboot America's image and boost US geo-political interests in the Middle East. Long prior to the convulsions of the Arab world that erupted in 2011, though, Obama's well-intentioned efforts were constrained by a set of deeply unpropitious

circumstances and unhelpful interlocutors: a set of actors in both Israel and Palestine who remained beset by mutual mistrust, deep internal divisions and adverse conditions on the ground; a set of rising powers newly willing and able to assert their own interests in the region, including even erstwhile US allies such as Turkey; a widespread perception of America as a distracted and weakening global Gulliver increasingly marginal to regional developments – a declining, unreliable and distracted regional power; an obdurate “resistance bloc” of Iran and its proxy allies Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas; and a set of apparently entrenched autocratic rulers whose inattention to the profound internal maladies of their nations increasingly threatened to dislodge even the most brutal of corrupt authoritarian regimes, even at the cost – as in Syria – of *de facto* civil war.

Faced by an unprecedented combination of total stasis in the peace process and unanticipated, startling and rapid change in the Arab world, Obama could perhaps be forgiven for a lack of clear and consistent policy responses. As Reuel Marc Gerecht and Mark Dubowitz put it, while on his first visit to the region in 2009 Obama’s “narrower, humbler” conception of America’s interests abroad had “confused the majesty of Islam with the dignity of Muslim potentates,” the president’s personal background – as the son of an African Muslim and an American woman who dedicated her life to the disadvantaged – made him “tailor-made to lead the United States in expanding democracy to the most unstable, autocratic and religiously militant part of the world.”⁵⁸

The Great Arab Revolt of 2011 did not fully convince Obama to embrace his “inner Bush” in public.⁵⁹ But his administration’s strategy underwent sharp shifts from one premised on the understanding that anti-Americanism in the Middle East had its roots in Muslims’ legitimate grievances with Washington’s foreign policies, and above all the intimate US relationship with Israel, to one that instead stressed the need for Arab self-determination, regime change and much of the same contentious “freedom agenda” that Bush had previously articulated to an astonished and disbelieving Middle East. Ironically, as Walter Russell Mead provocatively noted, having initially distanced himself from his predecessor’s foreign policies, “in general, President Obama succeeds where he adopts or modifies the policies of the Bush administration. Where (as on Israel) he has tried to deviate, his troubles begin”:

The most irritating argument anyone could make in American politics is that President Obama, precisely because he seems so liberal, so vacillating, so nice, is a more effective neo-conservative than President Bush. As is often the case, the argument is so irritating partly because it is so true ... President Obama is pushing a democracy agenda in the Middle East that is as aggressive as President Bush’s; he adopts regime change by violence if necessary as a core component of his regional approach and, to put it mildly, he is not afraid to bomb. But where President Bush’s tough guy posture (“Bring ‘Em On!”) alienated opinion abroad and among liberals at home, President Obama’s reluctant warrior stance makes it easier for others to work with him.⁶⁰

By the latter stages of Obama's term, his administration's regional strategy appeared more a haphazard hybrid of the peace process, democracy promotion, and pragmatic nation-by-nation approaches than a clear or consistent endorsement of any one organizing frame. Unfortunately, whatever its purported centrality to the emergence of a more stable and prosperous region, the prospects for conflict resolution on Israel-Palestine remained demonstrably weak, not least since the breakdown in US-Israeli relations that developed over 2009–12 – while not historically unprecedented – was deeper and more alarming for supporters of close bilateral ties than in previous instances. While popular American warmth towards Israel remains steadfast, fewer than half of Americans now support the US defending Israel against an attack by its neighbors⁶¹ and an increasing partisan polarization has arisen on the issue, with Republicans – driven in large part by Christian evangelicals, security hawks and neo-conservatives – far closer to near unconditional support than an increasingly sceptical cohort of disenchanted Democrats.⁶² While Jewish Americans remain strongly Democratic, this is not set in stone. Whether Jewish American financial and electoral support stays solid for Obama – at 78 percent in 2008 – may also influence the 2012 result, not least in key Electoral College states such as Florida and Pennsylvania. Obama will no doubt be aware that, after winning 71 percent of Jewish American votes in 1976, Jimmy Carter captured only 45 percent in 1980.

For all of Obama's tenacious attempts at outreach to Muslims, the seemingly chaotic, unreliable and ineffective efforts of his administration to pressure Tel Aviv – along with the continued US military presence and activity in Muslim lands from Yemen to Indonesia – substantially undercut symbolic signs of reconciliation and the expression of renewed respect with Islam. Those outreach efforts, absent comparable concern for Israeli sentiments, in turn compounded the acute mistrust in Israel that its national interests were marginal to those of the US president. Obama appeared – amidst deliberate and concerted international efforts to de-legitimize Israel and increase its diplomatic isolation – to regard Israel with disdain as more an albatross than an ally; as, in the words of Turkish premier Recep Tayyip Erdogan in September 2011, “the West's spoilt child.”⁶³

Resolving this basic tension in Obama's approach constitutes a necessary – if difficult and insufficient – condition of ensuring regional progress. But, given the feuding and the diplomatic paralysis of the past three years, together with the worsening relations between Israel and its Arab and Turkish neighbors, this seems highly unlikely. The growing American debate as to whether Israel is more a liability than an asset to US national security is increasingly echoed in Israel about America under Obama. Most clearly, if – despite Obama's repeated assertions that the US-Israel bond is “unshakeable” and a nuclear-armed Iran is “unacceptable” – Israel's closest ally is unable or unwilling to defend its security and disarm its one existential threat, the broader relationship faces

serious challenges with profound regional consequences. Not least, Israel appears increasingly unable to sustain the notions that it is both uniquely vulnerable but irresistibly powerful; what former Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol once termed the “poor little Samson.”

Far from mitigating regional animosities and tensions, US policy over 2009–12 left Israel even more internationally isolated, and hence more indisposed to offering comprehensive concessions for peace, than at the outset of Obama’s term – without significantly improving conditions on the ground on the West Bank or Gaza. With the Arab revolutions leaving Israel facing growing regional hostility, traditionally good Israeli relations with Turkey turning icily cold – after the deaths of nine pro-Palestinian activists when the Israeli navy intercepted a Turkish aid flotilla to Gaza, the *Mavi Marmara*, on May 31, 2010 – and the Saudis exasperated by American policies toward the region, the US appeared increasingly adrift and ineffectual to Israelis and Arabs alike. The once unthinkable – a strategic rupture not only between Washington and Tel Aviv but also between Washington and Riyadh – no longer appeared impossible.

Transformative change in the Middle East had indeed occurred on President Obama’s watch, but not of his own design. Anything but triumphalism therefore appeared appropriate in relation to Obama’s Middle East policy. As Boris Pasternak once wrote, “It is often difficult to distinguish victories from defeats.” The revolts across the Middle East over 2011, for once, were mercifully free of angry mobs engaging in ritualized burnings of American and Israeli flags, still less carrying revolutionary placards bearing Osama Bin Laden’s visage or vision. But while al Qaeda and its allies and affiliates cannot possibly seize power anywhere in the Muslim world, such groups typically thrive on state failure, societal chaos, and civil war. Only the most confident of observers could guarantee the outcomes of all the uprisings in the region avoiding such fates. Not only did the Arab Spring threaten to deteriorate into an Arab Winter of indeterminate duration, but the prospects for peace in the Middle East appeared at least as dim and distant by the latter part of Obama’s first term as at its beginning. And, as Zbigniew Brzezinski questioned, “Our exit from the region – which is not an exit willed by us but rather forced by circumstances – will continue and perhaps become more marked ... What happens in the region as we exit, and who on the outside will begin to capitalize on it?”⁶⁴