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US Election Note: Middle East Policy after 2012

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Summary points

- An Obama second term would lack the strategic coherence of his first term. The Middle East has generated a plethora of challenges, each requiring a different policy frame. By necessity, Obama's policy has become and will remain more reactive and ad hoc.
- A Romney administration would reinforce an Israel-centric strategy toward Middle Eastern affairs. Reinforcing Israel's core security needs would be moved up the roster of America's national security concerns. However, a Romney presidency would not seek to move Israel–Palestine peace forward and would not work towards establishing a Palestinian state.
- Romney may be making an interesting and brave calculation that Arab states which would otherwise be alienated by an overtly pro-Israel strategy in the region might be caught in a vice between America's stance and the fears of Iranian regional dominance. With a diminishing US dependence on Middle Eastern oil and a foreign policy that uses Israel's interests as a key benchmark, a Romney administration could nevertheless compel Arab states to acquiesce to and accept this standard if they wanted protection from Iran.
- Israel–Palestine peace efforts will re-emerge as a priority only when a new round of violence demands attention and draws the United States and Europe back in. The turmoil in Syria and elsewhere in the region, particularly in fragile new democracies such as Libya and Tunisia, will remain higher priorities.
- Disrupting and/or redirecting Iran's nuclear course will continue to be the dominant regional objective of either an Obama or a Romney administration. Romney would also maintain the same posture as Obama in conducting an aggressive drone campaign focused on transnational terrorists.

Introduction

The Middle East will be a significant challenge to US foreign policy-makers during the next administration – whether with regard to further transitions of the Arab Spring, Iran's appetite for nuclear weapons, Israel's posture towards Palestine and other Arab powers in its neighbourhood, or the rise of political Islam. Despite the US tilt to Asia, how Barack Obama or Mitt Romney deals with these issues will be a central part of the foreign policy agenda in the coming four years, as it has been for previous presidents.

Background

Following the events of 11 September 2001, the Middle East and its prospects became an even greater concern than before for US foreign policy. Traditional studies of US strategic priorities have tended to prioritize the massive reserves of Arab oil and gas, but the attacks changed the calculus from a pragmatic concern about energy to an emotional one about security and threats emanating from a dissimilar and poorly understood culture.

When President Obama took office in January 2009, the United States had already been at war for eight years in the Middle East. US troop levels were high in Iraq and substantial in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda and its affiliates had been to some degree ravaged by them but nevertheless demonstrated resilience in metastasizing in other failed and failing states; and its two top leaders remained at large. The world that President George W. Bush had divided between 'those who were with us and those who were against' was exhausted and increasingly irritated by what some perceived as a United States bent on transforming country after country in the Middle East. Finally, Obama also inherited a situation in which Israel had just invaded southern Lebanon after a Hezbollah border

provocation, responded to rocket attacks with a massive deployment of force in Gaza, and begun yet again to expand settlements in the Occupied Palestinian territory.

By 2009, America's military capacity was badly overstretched with large-scale military and state-building investments in Afghanistan and Iraq. Its economy had suffered its most significant downturn since the 1930s. The 9/11 fears that shook American sensibilities had resulted in actions – from rendition to the suspension of *habeas corpus* rights and the abuses at Bagram and Guantánamo – that made the world, and many Americans, question US human rights standards. Meanwhile, the global economic and political architecture crafted by the United States and its allies after the Second World War – including the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank – were no longer appropriate to the reality of a world of new rising powers.

While President Obama's early speeches earned global praise, he was then seen, particularly in the Arab world, as failing to translate his aspirations and conviction into tangible policies or results. Despite Israel–Palestine issues being made a key priority, there was no real movement towards a peace track. Nor has there been much progress in pushing Iran to suspend its nuclear programme.

On the other hand, Obama did wind down the US military combat presence in Iraq, oversee the killing of Osama bin Laden and other top-tier Al-Qaeda affiliates, and manoeuvre, much as Bush had done, between intervention in conflicts such as Libya's revolution to cautious realism (thus far) in similar revolutionary situations such as in Syria and Iran.

This is the tally of challenges to which the next president taking office in January will have to attend. Assessing what Obama might do in a second term, or Romney if elected, with regard to the Middle East is of global importance and likely to have serious consequences, positive and negative, on other nations' perception of American power.

Policy positions

A second Obama term

The top priorities of President Obama in the Middle East have shifted in four years from seducing Iran away from a nuclear-weapons course, establishing a Palestinian state and getting Israeli–Arab relations back on a normalization track. The priority today is one of navigating the turbulence and uncertainty of the Arab Spring without creating significant vulnerabilities for the United States or openings for geostrategic rivals.

An Obama second term would be likely to lack the cohesive, strategic vision that the president spelled out when he first came to office, and might appear to be more a jumble of various policies put together as ad hoc reactions to problems. Partnering with Britain and France in a limited but successful intervention in Libya created new demands for more interventions that President Obama has rebuffed so far. The success in Libya has not led Obama to push a 'one size fits all' military intervention as the response to each of the convulsions in the region since they have had very different drivers and require differentiated approaches.

Fixing Israel-Palestine, in Obama's early formulation, was paramount to the hearts-and-minds strategy he was trying to mix with his hard-power commitment to kill prominent terrorist leaders. Moving the peace process forward meant finding opportunities to strengthen Israel's coordination with other Middle Eastern states. With Israel and Palestine now pushed to the periphery of Obama's concerns, there appears to be little strategy for the region except to keep Israel relatively calm while a political Islam rises around it.

It is not clear whether President Obama is willing to invest more personal capital, resources and time in a relationship so fraught with seemingly insoluble challenges. He is more likely to devote effort to restoring a process that encourages Israelis and Palestinians to talk – but without expectation that much will be resolved. The United States will also try to remain on the sidelines as much as possible in the Syrian conflict and in dealing with new convulsions in Egypt, Tunisia, and

Yemen, and it will work to increase the number of international partners engaged in dealing with the turmoil in the Middle East.

In other words, Obama's early strategic vision for the Middle East has been replaced by policies designed to engage the reform and democracy movements in the Arab region without generating large-scale responsibilities or exposure for the United States. Efforts to win hearts and minds in the region will be downsized until a new equilibrium is restored to these states – and until America sorts out what kind of vision it can offer to people in the region that will motivate them to defend the US relationship with their countries.

After the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and with one under way in Syria, the Obama administration has resisted offering a single template for intervention. The action in Libya applied a number of criteria including a requirement for definable results and the involvement of other regional actors. In the case of Syria, Obama's team has not been able to generate the same kind of international support for action.

Thus it appears that, at least during the beginning of an Obama second term, the caution demonstrated in the Syria case would probably remain the pattern of behaviour in the region. The recent riots in several majority-Muslim countries, and the killing of the US Ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, and members of his staff after an offensive American-made video that mocked the prophet Mohammed, make it even more likely that Obama would tread very carefully in the region.

The United States and its Western allies will be pressed to work with Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen and other parts of the region to help bolster national economies and to try to jump-start job creation through investment. Economic support for the region is likely to be part of the Obama second-term game plan. However, American foreign policy will be redesigned to work within the contextual reality of austere budgets and an allergy to foreign aid among many US voters.

There is little doubt that Iran and its acquisition of weaponizable nuclear capacity would remain among the highest priorities of an Obama administration. Iran's course threatens to undermine Obama's investments in restoring a global commons that resists the spread of WMD materials and nuclear weapons. Another priority would be stewardship of relations with Saudi Arabia, given that country's role as one of the vital balancers against growing Iranian power and aspirations in the region.

A second Obama administration would also prioritize engaging more Middle Eastern and North African leaders who are part of the rising movement of political Islam. Obama will no doubt invest time in working with Egypt President Mohammed Morsy to encourage his constructive involvement in the international system.

To sum up, the recent violent uprisings in the region, combined with ambivalence inside the United States about nation-building efforts, are likely to lead to a much more humble Middle East plan in a second Obama administration. Obama has committed himself to drawing down America's resource commitments to the Middle East and to building up economic and military commitments in Asia. Thus, while it is said that the situation in the Middle East, particularly Israel-Palestine, refuses to be ignored and will erupt, demanding White House attention if not actively managed, the fact is that the real focus of Obama's attention in a second term would be on the Asia-Pacific region.

A Romney presidency

To many observers, Governor Mitt Romney's foreign policy profile appears to be a hybrid, on the one hand, of traditional establishment Republicanism that embraces long-standing alliances, robust investment in the military, prioritization of national security and free-trade-style globalization and, on the other, a more hawkish posture that pugnaciously targets enemies and rivals. In other words, Romney appears both cautious about deploying America's military power and eager to do so.

Romney has repeatedly stated that the security of Israel and the promotion of its interests in the Middle East would be the starting point of his national security strategy in the region. He has made

clear that he leans strongly towards favouring Israeli interests over Arab ones. On that basis, his regional strategy could be bold and quite different from that of previous presidents. This perceived bias would leave countries that are stuck in the middle either to acquiesce to Iran's rising influence or to embrace the new Israeli-US partnership as a reality they cannot counterbalance.

Romney was revealed to have said at a fundraiser earlier this year that he sees no real chance of moving the Israel-Palestine peace process forward, and therefore would 'kick the ball down the field'. Such an approach would have the potential to lay the groundwork for a paradigm-shattering approach to Middle East issues, very different from what others have really contemplated.

A nuclear-hungry Iran, eager to climb the ladder of global prestige and power, would be regarded as an enemy of US interests and a clear enemy of Israel, and this is an issue on which Romney would focus aggressively.

On other matters such as terrorism, Iran's nuclear programme and the use of drones, the differences between Romney and Obama are nuanced and minor. While the hard contours and edges of a Romney foreign policy cannot yet be known, he may believe that American dependence on oil from the Middle East will begin to decline precipitously as the boom in natural gas takes off in the United States. A shift from being a net oil and gas importer to potentially a global energy superpower would make the courtship of Saudi Arabia and other oil-producing nations, even Iraq, less important.

Despite Romney's rhetoric on American power and its unique role in the world, his foreign policy advisory team is comprised of both key wings of the Republic foreign policy establishment – neoconservatives and realists. The realists are more circumspect and cautious about the increasing tendency of officials to want to engage in regime change and nation-building. Thus far, however, Romney appears to be more strongly influenced by the neoconservative group including the former US Ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton, and former Coalition Provisional Authority official Daniel Senor, who have both been strong advocates of an approach based on 'American greatness'. However, realists such as Robert Zoellick, former US Trade Representative and World Bank President, and Robert Kimmitt, former US Ambassador to Germany and Deputy Treasury Secretary, would most likely push back against more extreme neoconservative views.

Romney, like the current Israeli leadership, seems to prefer a strategy for Israel's security that is based on its relationship with the United States to the exclusion of other broader policies that would involve engaging more and normalizing relations with its neighbours. Given his statements and team, Romney would be likely to work to build up Israel's military and economic lead over rivals in the Middle East, and could well (effectively, if not formally) abandon the goal of a Palestinian state. He would maintain a tough posture against Iran, perhaps not endorsing and pursuing a hot military conflict but remaining aggressive with sanctions and potentially hard-edged on military threats.

When it comes to directly tackling Arab-based terrorism and the metastization of Al-Qaeda-type terror networks, the two candidates offer similar approaches. Romney would most likely maintain the extensive use of drones, Navy SEAL teams and other military capabilities that Obama has deployed.

If Romney takes a strong position on Middle Eastern issues, as his comments have suggested, that would be as revolutionary as what is unfolding in the Arab Spring. It might cause even more dramatic global adjustments as Romney shifted the terms on which countries in the region received American attention and support.

International implications

The international community may have to deal with two very clear alternatives when it comes to the United States in the Middle East – one of cautious strategic adjustment away from the region and towards Asia under Obama, or a recalibration of US alliances and relationships under Romney, in which threats such as Iran are amplified, allies such as Israel are defended more vigorously, and Sunni Arab states are compelled to make a choice as their own influence over the White House diminishes.

What is clear is that neither leader seems willing or prepared to attempt a 'Nixon Goes to China' reordering in the alignment of global powers. Obama's stance on the pressures for domestic reform in the Arab states has been to encourage change but not to intervene heavily – while at the same time taking steps to shrink the US footprint of military and economic obligations to the region. This is a significant shift and may result in the region feeling increasingly abandoned as its youth demand jobs and as radical Islamic clerics try to animate the passions of those disaffected.

Romney's tight embrace of Israel and likely decision to increase support to that country through arms sales, technology-transfer cooperation and joint security planning may alienate neighbours such as Egypt and Jordan that have been strong partners in peace with Israel. But given the rise of Iran, Romney may ignore the concerns of leaders in the neighbourhood and ramp up efforts to constrain Iran – confronting these states with having to abandon their allergy to Israel and choose sides.

This could cause enormous internal disruption inside Arab states as their leaderships and public opinion diverge over relations with the United States and Israel and over regional security questions, potentially fuelling more revolutions that further empower organizations and parties of political Islam.

It is unclear what Romney might do in such circumstances, particularly if the turbulence contributed to terrorist recruitment and non-state, transnational terrorist activity. Romney's answer thus far has been to call for increasing defence spending to 4 per cent of GDP (approximately \$100 billion more than current levels) and fixing it there permanently, and not to accommodate those Arab Muslims who are concerned about US policy, but to use US power to fight terrorists and defend American interests and allies.

In short, to the degree that the international community would like to see the United States take significant new, globally clarifying and stabilizing geostrategic steps in the region, frustration will prevail. Under Obama, America is likely to be less involved in the Middle East, and under Romney, assuming he takes the stronger position laid out by his neoconservative advisers, it will take a more assertive stance. Neither of these scenarios is likely to help solve the challenges in this region or improve the standing of the United States. And both are likely to demand a stronger involvement by other countries.

Whenever major conflict seems likely, states are compelled to pick sides. Under Romney, Middle Eastern countries and organizations, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council, might find a less accommodating partner in the United States given its perceived diminishing dependence on their oil and gas reserves. At the same time, China and Russia – which have been resistant to allowing the United States the leverage in international institutions it needs to really put pressure on Iran and Syria – may decide to consolidate their regional roles to replace a less engaged America.

Thus the alternatives for the international community are more significant than many have acknowledged – either low-level global turbulence that America and the West respond to by offering counsel but keeping at arm's length under Obama, or a potentially bold effort by Romney to pursue an aggressive, conflictual path with problematic countries such as Iran in an attempt to restore American regional pre-eminence.

About the Author

Steve Clemons is Editor at Large for *The Atlantic* and editor in chief of AtlanticLive. He is Senior Fellow and the Founder of the American Strategy Programme at the New America Foundation, where he previously served as executive vice president. He is also publisher of the popular political and foreign policy blog, *The Washington Note*. He is a member of the World Economic Forum Council on Geopolitical Risk and was co-founder of the Afghanistan Strategy Group and the New America Foundation's Middle East Task Force. His writing and commentary appear widely in American and national media.

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