

Analysis No. 221, December 2013

## RETURNING TO THE MIDDLE EAST: THE SECOND TERM AMIDST THE ARAB UPRISINGS

Glen Rangwala

This paper explores the extent to which the Arab uprisings that began in December 2010 have transformed US policy to the Middle East under Barack Obama's presidency. The first term was marked by a desire to disengage from the type and scale of political commitments and military presence in the Middle East that were most strongly associated with Obama's predecessor. The hesitancy which marked the US response to the first wave of protests across the Arab world has gradually given way to a series of selective commitments, particularly in Syria, Iran and Palestine-Israel, which have developed despite the reported personal reluctance of Obama himself. The paper will explore four major reasons for this partial reversal of stance: as a response to changing circumstances, a result of domestic pressures, arising from the role of key regional allies, and as part of the projection of international credibility. Overall, the paper examines the national and international dynamics that continue to propel heavy US engagement in the politics and conflicts of the Middle East, and the prospects for the Arab uprisings themselves in the context of a re-energised US policy approach.

*Glen Rangwala is a University Lecturer and Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge University in England*

## A shifting focus in foreign policy

Perhaps the most significant reversal of US policy over the period of President Barack Obama's time in office, and certainly its most striking shift in foreign policy, has been from a position of calculated detachment from the affairs of the Middle East to a full-scale re-engagement across the range of policy tools. This shift has come in the context of the uprisings across the Arab world that began in December 2010, but was not an immediate reaction: it was only towards the end of President Obama's first term of office that the Middle East starting drawing the US administration decisively back in to its orbit. This paper reviews and evaluates four reasons that have commonly been given for this alteration in US policy, and looks to the consequences in the region of a re-energised US approach.

First, though, it is necessary to appreciate the extent to which there was a deliberate attempt from 2009 to extract the US from many of its prior Middle Eastern entanglements. The president took office in the 'midst of crisis', as he put it at the start of his 2009 Inauguration Address, with the prospects for the US economy highly uncertain: from the start, ensuring economic recovery was an overriding priority. So when the President offered Hillary Clinton the position of Secretary of State in November 2008, he explicitly warned her that he would not be able to devote much attention to foreign policy, and that his focus would be on domestic policy<sup>1</sup>. This reflects the reduced priority that foreign affairs were given from the outset of the first Obama administration compared with its predecessors.

Even within this newly reduced sphere of foreign policy, the commonly voiced objective of subjecting the US's relations with the rest of the world to a 'reset' pointed to a move towards policies directed more to emerging powers – particularly in East Asia – rather than the web of alliances and enmities built up over the decades in the Middle East. Bringing the military presence in Iraq to an end had been a key campaign pledge for the new president, although one that had been set in train by his predecessor. The perceived negative legacy not just of the Bush administration in the region, but the extent to which many recent presidencies had come unstuck through events in the Middle East – Carter with the Iran hostage crisis, Reagan with Iran-Contra scandal, and Clinton with the failed attempt at peacemaking that ended with the second Palestinian intifada – cannot but have left the new president with a sense that there was little reliably to be gained through devoting foreign policy energies to this unpredictable region.

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<sup>1</sup> Joint interview with Secretary Clinton and President Obama, '60 minutes', CBS News, 27 January 2013, <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=50139849n>, at 7.28-7.46.

The foreign policy focus on the Middle East upheld by many past presidents was therefore replaced with a turn to emerging powers, particularly apparent in the pivot to East Asia, the oft-repeated reference to rebalancing the US's foreign policy, and the proclamation of 'America's Pacific Century'<sup>2</sup>. In the National Security Strategy of the new administration, released in May 2010, the discussion of the Middle East was relegated to a short section buried midway through the report. The discussion of national security instead began distinctively with an account of building resilience within US borders, and the strategic conception was focused on the importance of alliances and relationships with other global centres of influence – in which there was only a passing reference to the countries of the Middle East<sup>3</sup>.

The Middle East did not disappear from the agenda of the administration: the Cairo speech of June 2009, on the need for a 'new beginning' in relations between the US and Muslims, was one of the most high profile foreign policy moments for the president during his first term. But absent from this and other foreign policy statements was the claim to some form of leadership in the region, of the sort that was most associated with the George W. Bush presidency: the administration sought to avoid staking its own credibility upon projects that fundamentally relied upon others for their take-up. Instead, there was sympathy to the prospect of using a regional power, particularly Turkey, to fill what was perceived as a potential leadership vacuum<sup>4</sup>. The Cairo speech marked the president's one of only two visits to the Middle East during his first term of office, the other being to Iraq earlier in the same year.

This reduced priority on foreign policy and the refocusing within foreign policy away from the Middle East during the first years can be contrasted with an increasingly assertive tone that developed from 2011. Libya firstly and then Syria, Egypt, Israel-Palestine and Iran have all been subjects of detailed policy pronouncements since then. The time commitment and diplomatic resources expended on the Middle East have again become considerable: in Secretary of State John Kerry's first nine months in office in 2013, he made eight different trips to the Middle East. This compares with one trip to China and Indonesia, two to Japan and none to Australia during the same period: the Pacific tilt was no more. President Obama's speech to the General Assembly in September 2013 also illustrates this shift of focus: almost the entirety of the 50-minute speech was devoted to the Middle East, with Syria, Iran, the Israel-Palestine conflict, Egypt and

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<sup>2</sup> H. CLINTON, *America's Pacific Century*, «Foreign Policy», November 2011, pp. 56-63.

<sup>3</sup> B. OBAMA, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, May 2010, pp. 24-26 and p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> F.A. GERGES, *The Obama approach to the Middle East: the end of America's moment?*, «International Affairs», vol. 89, no. 2, 2013, pp. 316-18.

Libya each discussed in detail. The rest of the world was mentioned only in passing: Mali, Kenya, the ‘Pacific region’ and, surprisingly briefly, Afghanistan and Pakistan, were each mentioned once. By 2013, therefore, US foreign policy had doubled back upon itself and returned to the Middle East. The question is: why?

### Explaining the reversal

Published commentary and analysis on the foreign policy challenges of the second Obama term has tended to monocausal explanations of the reasons why the Middle East is once again centre stage.<sup>5</sup> These explanations can be grouped into four categories. First, the unforeseen political dynamics of the Middle East, principally the Arab Uprisings, are seen by many as compelling the US administration to renew its engagement with the Middle East. Secondly, some have argued that domestic interests and the changing composition of the foreign policy team have pushed a reluctant president back into an activist Middle East-centred foreign policy. Thirdly, the key role of US allies within the Middle East in propelling re-engagement has been highlighted by many commentators. Finally, the administration is characterised by some analysts as responding to a perceived decline in the international standing of the US that came from a foreign policy that no longer asserted a global leadership role. Although these explanations are complementary, the relative weight of each of them matters in understanding the dynamics of US foreign policy, and the extent to which the Middle East’s place in that policy is a resilient one.

The most uncomplicated explanation of the renewed focus on the Middle East comes from the extent of regional turbulence. As Obama’s first term began in 2009, there were few signs or predictions of significant political change. Civil strife in Iraq was in abeyance; the hawkish shift in Israeli politics, coupled with a divided Palestinian administration, meant that no progress in peace talks would be possible; the stalemate in Lebanese politics endured; and across the region, authoritarian governments seemed to be without serious domestic challengers. The only arena in which significant change could be seen as likely at the time was in Iran, but the controversial outcome of the presidential election in 2009 and the marginalisation of the Green Movement, put an end to hopes that US-Iranian relations would improve during the next four years. At the

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<sup>5</sup> Examples can be found in the contributions made at a Brookings Institute panel by S. ÖZEL, T. WITTES and R. KAGAN, which roughly correspond to the second, third and fourth explanations respectively: ‘U.S. global leadership in the second Obama administration: priorities and realities’, Washington, DC, 11 October 2013, at: <http://www.brookings.edu/events/2013/10/11-us-global-leadership-in-second-obama-administration-priorities-realities>.

time, new headline policies about the Middle East would be seen as having few prospects for success.

The uprisings across the region from December 2010 created and empowered a new set of political actors, resulting both in unforeseen opportunities for influence and new security threats. The militarisation of the uprisings and the governmental response in Libya and later in Syria created the spectre of a regional security crisis that would spiral out of control without attention from external political actors. The refocusing of US attention on the Middle East can be seen therefore as a direct response to the new situation there, with the US helping in the creation of a new political order, one that would conform to US interests and values, out of a turbulent and unpredictable setting.

Although it is clear that political change in the region has been the basis for renewed US engagement, by itself it cannot explain the shift in US focus. There is no straightforward way in which the uprisings and conflicts of the Middle East were more worthy of the highest level of attention from the US than, for example, the crisis in the Sahel, the changing parameters of the conflicts in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes, or the invigorated confrontation over sovereignty claims in the East and South China Seas. All of these disputes have regional, and potentially global, security implications, and all of them have been subject of external military involvement and diplomatic brokerage, including by the US. And yet none of them have generated the sort of political attention devoted by the US administration to the Middle East since 2011.

The difficulty in understanding US foreign policy purely as a set of responses to external events prompts many instead to look to domestic politics, especially popular sentiments, pressure groups, economic lobbies and the personnel within the administration to explain why policy shifts occur. On this range of issues, there are factors that are clearly relevant. The politicisation of Middle East during the re-election campaign, including strained relations with Israel and particularly the killing of four members of the US diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya, in September 2012, led to a perception among some voters that Obama's foreign policy was weak and vacillating, notwithstanding the strike against Osama bin Laden the preceding year. The choice of John Kerry, with a high public profile and a reputation for assertiveness, as the new Secretary of State can be seen as a response to this. Critics would allege that Kerry, unlike his predecessor, has a tendency to see his role as confronting public crises on the international stage, an approach which led him to focus on the Middle East, rather than to build America's geostrategic position, which

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would take him instead to East Asia<sup>6</sup>. Both supporters and critics of the new Secretary of State would therefore concur in explaining the higher profile given to Syria and the Israel-Palestine conflict under Kerry than Clinton can be explained by their influence of their personal characteristics.

Explanations centred on domestic politics and personalities have some usefulness in understanding the renewed focus on the Middle East, but they can only go so far. Some second term officials, such as National Security Advisor Susan Rice, appointed in July 2013, remain strong advocates of scaling down commitments in the Middle East, even as those commitments in practice were increasing. US foreign policy had already begun focusing heavily on the Middle East towards the end of the first term; the new foreign policy team did not itself bring about that change. It is also difficult to discern economic motivations for this shift, especially in conditions of a decreasing need for energy imports. Although the uprisings threatened the security of oil exports, particularly from Libya, this was never a specific target of US diplomatic or practical intervention. Foreign policy, as has been the norm in US politics, has little impact on electorate, and it is difficult to attribute greater attention to the Middle East to the effect of domestic lobbies.

Indeed, some of the most strident advocates for a more active US role in the Middle East have not its domestic actors but instead its Middle Eastern allies. Perceived US inaction on Libya in early 2011 and on Syria from mid-2011 resulted in numerous calls from Qatar Saudi Arabia and Turkey (in the case of Syria) for the US to provide military assistance to the anti-regime insurgents, and to consider military intervention itself. After Hassan Rouhani's election as Iran's new president, it was to the US that Israel and many of the Gulf States turned with vigorous lobbying campaigns to forestall any softening of the existing international sanctions regime towards Iran. Many leaders in the region made prominent calls for the US to pronounce on the legitimacy, or the lack thereof, of the ousting of the elected Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013. Saudi Arabia's strong support for Egypt's new military-backed government seems to have stimulated Kerry's conciliatory approach towards it, despite initial hostility.

The action of regional allies can be seen as precipitating US attention in a different way. As the conflict in Syria developed, a number of countries that sought the removal of Bashar al-Assad's government provided military assistance to rebel groups. These efforts seem to have been largely uncoordinated, or even competitive, with different insurgent

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<sup>6</sup> R.D. Kaplan, *Kerry's Middle East obsession*, Stratfor Analysis, 25 September 2013, via: <http://www.stratfor.com/sample/weekly/kerrys-middle-east-obsession>.

groups drawing upon support from external sponsors. The result was a fractious set of rebel movements who by 2012 were sometimes in open conflict with each other. The US was also providing military support to some groups using the name of the Free Syria Army, but had not positioned itself in an overarching coordinating role. The proliferation of funding channels can be seen to have reduced the overall effectiveness of the anti-Assad opposition, prolonging and exacerbating the conflict, and leaving the way open for international jihadi groups to become dominant in some regions of the country. This experience would have indicated to many within the US administration by the end of 2012 that it is hazardous to take a low-key role in a process dominated by the vigorous actions of allies: if problems develop, the major power ends up being sucked into a process that is not of their own making.

The accusation that the tails have been wagging the dog is a familiar one in US foreign policy, and in the cases of how policy was developed to Iran, Egypt and Syria it may well hold true. Nevertheless, the US has previously stood apart from its allies' call for greater involvement, most notably in respect of the Israel-Palestine conflict, whilst retaining a significant role elsewhere in the region. The responsiveness of the US to these calls and stances of its allies itself requires explanation.

For some critics, what has distinguished the period of the first Obama administration was the perceived decline in international credibility that came with its detached approach towards the Middle East. For these critics, it is not its effect on US public opinion, and not only its effect upon its Middle Eastern allies that is at issue. Instead, it is the sense that the reduced role of the US in a region in which it had previously positioned itself as a hegemonic power is emblematic of declining US power on the global stage. It was seen to have little interest in or capacity to direct the troubled transitions, in which established pro-Washington leaders in Yemen, Tunisia and Egypt and an increasingly cooperative leadership in Qadhafi's Libya were all displaced. This in turn had indirect but significant consequences on the US's international standing, in which other countries, including those allied with the US, would have diminished reluctance in challenging US assertions of leadership over collective diplomatic and security ventures. For critics, Obama's first term policy showed that the US's projection of itself as 'the indispensable nation', as Madeleine Albright famously characterised it, was no longer plausible around the world. The reestablishment of an implicit claim to a leadership role in the Middle East in the second term therefore is seen as rectifying the diminishment of global status experienced during the first term.

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## A new US role?

If the reassertion of a leadership role in the high profile conflicts and tensions of the Middle East is to be seen as part of the reorientation of US foreign policy during the second term, it is by no means a straightforward task to accomplish. Indeed, the early experience of this reorientation is that a sense of preeminent authority, when lost, is hard to regain. By the time the US administration decided to make a significant intervention in the Syrian conflict in August 2013, through missile strikes on key facilities, it found itself outmanoeuvred through a Russian diplomatic venture. The Russian government successfully reframed the area of contention as one solely about the use and retention of chemical weapons, which could be resolved through existing international machinery, thus eliminating the need for any direct US involvement. Similarly, when the US administration announced a limited freeze on military aid to Egypt in October 2013, the Egyptian military authorities reacted with disdain and Saudi Arabia stepped in to offset the shortfall. The vocal criticism of the US role in negotiations with Iran by leaders in Israel, and the potential undermining of it by France, significantly disrupted a Western stance towards Iran that had previously been unified. Such actions by close allies of the US, frustrating key policies decided at the highest levels of the administration, demonstrate the difficulty the Obama administration continues to face in re-establishing its lead role in the region.

In this context, the Obama administration is faced more clearly than in 2009 with a dilemma. It could accept a multipolar Middle East, in which the US's choice not to take responsibility for achieving specific outcomes is paid for by a diminishing need for regional and international powers to look to the US for an authoritative voice in international affairs. Or it could reassert its pre-eminence with the vigour of previous administrations. The cost of this second approach is the enmities that follow from taking sides in contentious situations re-emerge, and much of the energy of the administration could be dissipated for little tangible result. Many have suggested that, notwithstanding recent stances, Obama's personal inclination remains with the first approach. The second term will demonstrate the extent to which those inclinations still hold sway in foreign policy.

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