

Obama's Foreign Policy: the case of the Middle East

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I would like to start by deconstructing my own title and interrogate the usual way of talking about foreign policy. The foreign policy of the US is often designated by the name of the President thus one talks of Kennedy's foreign policy or George W. Bush's or Obama's. This is a linguistic convention which supposedly helps to distinguish policies from one administration to the next. It both obscures strong lines of continuity between administrations and also ruptures within the presidency of a particular leader. Thus George W. Bush's foreign policy shifted significantly in 2006 when Rumsfeld was forced out of the cabinet to be replaced by Gates whom Obama kept in his post for a few years thus underlining continuity with the second phase of his predecessor's foreign policy. We will review the actors involved in the shaping of foreign policy and their impact on changes as well as factors explaining continuity or change within the parameters of the conference thus trying to determine "who governs in the formulation of foreign policy". First I will tackle the rhetorical journey that Obama undertook from his Cairo speech to his kill list of potential assassinations.

Obama the speech maker vs Obama the chief executive officer

In June 2009 Obama went to Egypt, still ruled by autocrat Mubarak, to deliver a speech which was widely considered as an attempt to reach out to Muslims and to the Arab world. He declared:

I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles – principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.

About the Israeli-Palestinian conflict he expressed his support of Israel and his condemnation of Holocaust deniers just before his visit to Buchenwald the next day and added:

The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. This construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop.

About Iran while he clearly opposed the development of a nuclear bomb for this country he affirmed his desire to work through diplomatic channels:

It will be hard to overcome decades of mistrust, but we will proceed with courage, rectitude and resolve. There will be many issues to discuss between our two countries, and we are willing to move forward without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect.¹

In this speech which was considered to be an olive branch to the Muslim world Obama announced his intentions and presented a philosophy and *Weltanschauung* which corresponded to his previous statement before he became president. So it is legitimate to view it as a yardstick to measure his achievements or the results of US foreign policy in the region of the wider Middle East. In 2011 in his speech to the UN Obama repeated his belief in a two-state solution yet blocked the Palestinian initiative to become a full member of the UN and his opposition to the building of new settlements had been successfully countered by the Israeli Prime Minister and his allies in the US. In 2012 Palestine figured only in one paragraph and had disappeared from the main preoccupations of the Administration. Iran had taken center-stage in both his and Netanyahu's speech. During the presidential debate between Obama and Romney devoted to foreign policy Iran was the most often cited country (45 times) just before Israel (34) and Palestine was not mentioned at all.² This is by no means a novel situation. As Walter Russell Meade argues:

A Gallup poll in June 1948 showed that almost three times as many Americans "sympathized with the Jews" as "sympathized with the Arabs." That support was no flash in the pan. Widespread gentile support for Israel is one of the most potent political forces in U.S. foreign policy, and in the last 60 years, there has never been a Gallup poll showing more Americans sympathizing with the Arabs or the Palestinians than with the Israelis.³

In his book entitled *The Crisis of Zionism*, Peter Beinart tells the story of how Obama came to abandon his insistence on the end of settlements and how in May 2011 Obama and Netanyahu got involved in what the Israeli leader called a "diplomatic war" over a mention of the 1967 borders by Obama in a speech delivered at AIPAC the leading organization of the organized Jewish community and one actor in the pro-Israel lobby. Beinart concludes:

The May 2011 clash over the 1967 lines proved to be the last time President Obama publicly articulated the liberal Zionism that he had learned in Chicago. After that, he effectively adopted Benjamin Netanyahu's monist Zionism as his own.⁴

¹ The full text can be found at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

² see: Pierre Guerlain, "The United States and the World", *Huffington Post*, November 2, 2012

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/pierre-guerlain/the-united-states-and-the-b_2066736.html

³ "The New Israel and the Old", *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 2008, p. 28-46. Russell Meade goes on: "In the United States, a pro-Israel foreign policy does not represent the triumph of a small lobby over the public will. It represents the power of public opinion to shape foreign policy in the face of concerns by foreign policy professionals." This is an important aspect which however begs the question of how public opinion is shaped. Further down the writer adds: "THE UNITED STATES' sense of its own identity and mission in the world has been shaped by readings of Hebrew history and thought. The writer Herman Melville expressed this view: 'We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people--the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world.'"

American support for Israel is confirmed in a Pew Research Center poll: <http://www.people-press.org/2012/03/15/little-support-for-u-s-intervention-in-syrian-conflict/?src=prc-headline>

⁴ Peter Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism*, New York, Henry Holt, 2012, p. 154.

Nearly four years after Obama's Cairo speech anti-American sentiment in the Muslim and Arab world is strong, stronger according to some accounts than when George W. Bush was in power. Attacks on the American consulate in Benghazi in September 2012 which led to the assassination of the American ambassador underline this hostility. The Obama administration is caught between its desire to "have Israel's back" as Obama several times expressed it and its determination not to intervene overtly in a war against Iran. So in his 2012 UN speech he both threatened Iran and reassured Israel:

Make no mistake: a nuclear-armed Iran is not a challenge that can be contained. It would threaten the elimination of Israel, the security of Gulf nations, and the stability of the global economy.

The road is hard but the destination is clear – a secure, Jewish state of Israel; and an independent, prosperous Palestine.

Even Israeli secret services do not believe Iran poses a real threat and most serious analysts know that Iran could not even dream of using a nuclear bomb against Israel without being vaporized by Israeli and American responses.⁵ Using the expression "Jewish state" to refer to Israel is an echo of a new Israeli demand that the Palestinians recognize not just Israel (which the PLO did as early as 1988) but the Jewish character of the nation when no other state is recognized for its ethnic or religious character. On May 29, 2012 the *New York Times* revealed that Obama personally approved the killing of targeted terrorists or alleged terrorists, a group which may include American citizens which makes their execution illegal⁶. So this journey from 2009 in Cairo to AIPAC in 2011 just two years later seems to indicate a change in Obama's attitude or beliefs which requires explanations. The kill list is at odds with the image of Obama as a liberal law professor. This prompts a foreign policy analyst to ask: "Barack Obama is a smart guy. So why has he spent the last four years executing such a dumb foreign policy?"⁷

Two types of explanations are provided to explain these changes or fluctuations: one blames Obama for being a weak president who caves in whenever he faces determined opposition, whether from Republicans in Congress or the Israeli PM, the other is that Obama is the prisoner of institutional constraints and that the power of the president is dependent upon various actors, factors and interactions so not the power of an individual. I intend to review some of these actors and factors and brush aside the purely psychological approach. Obama proved decisive when he chose to launch the assassination of Ben Laden, his decisiveness though was a factor of a general agreement and also violated both international law and American law. He proved indecisive in his

⁵ Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran*, 2012, New Haven, Yale University Press

⁶ "Secret 'Kill List' Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will"

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?pagewanted=all>

"Mr. Obama is the liberal law professor who campaigned against the Iraq war and torture, and then insisted on approving every new name on an expanding "kill list," poring over terrorist suspects' biographies on what one official calls the macabre "baseball cards" of an unconventional war."

⁷ John Feffer, *Foreign Policy in Focus*, September 6, 2012.

http://www.fpiif.org/articles/dumb_and_dumber_obamas_smart_power_foreign_policy

dealings with Boehner in Congress or Netanyahu but this apparent weakness has institutional determinants.

Actors and factors in the formulation of US foreign policy in the Middle East

Congress though it is very unpopular among Americans (only 11% approve of it)⁸ does play a key role in the formulation of some aspects of foreign policy. It may be rather indifferent or amorphous when it comes to intervening in Libya as in 2011 but when it comes to Israel Congress is a major player. The book by Walt and Mearsheimer⁹ may have some major flaws but it describes very well how Congress always fights presidents who deviate from a pro-Israeli line whether Bush 1 or Obama. The pro-Israel lobby, which includes not only AIPAC but also Christian fundamentalists and large segments of the military-industrial complex lobbies Congress effectively. It funds the campaigns of pro-Israel candidates or focuses on the critics of Israel to destroy their campaigns. So many Congressmen and women are financially dependent on this lobby. US public opinion is also very ignorant of the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and tends to feel closer to Israel, a Western nation than to the Palestinians, an Arab group. Congress often abdicates its power and bows to the imperial presidency, as it did when it let the Bush administration launch its wars or illegal surveillance programs. So the question is why is Congress such a major actor when it comes to the Middle East? Here a systemic analysis is required.

Congress cannot be apprehended in isolation or even with the power of AIPAC or Israel in mind. The military-industrial complex also plays a major role in the funding of campaigns and in the determination of US foreign policy. If all sources of power are aligned then US policy, which is presented as the policy of the president, is forceful and clear. When there are conflicts within elite circles and powerful institutions the policy is the result of a fight between various actors and institutions. The Pentagon and the CIA are often at odds, with the Pentagon winning most of the time when Rumsfeld was Defense Secretary. It is thus quite erroneous to present clashes between the US and Israel, rare though they are, at least in public, as clashes between a strong wily alpha male, Netanyahu, and a weak-willed Mr Softy Obama. The personality traits play a part but a minor one. Netanyahu is universally detested, as a remark by Sarkozy to Obama made plain, but his power does not come from his personality.¹⁰ Even the fact that he is the leader of the US's closest client state does not fully explain his influence. His close relationship to Republicans and the close relationship other Israeli leaders entertain with Democrats are better explanations of his power, without forgetting, of course, large segments of American public opinion.¹¹

⁸ Lawrence Lessig, *Lost: How Money Corrupts Congress--and a Plan to Stop It*, New York, Hachette Books, 2011.

⁹ Stephen Walt et John Mearsheimer, *The Israel Lobby and U.S Foreign Policy*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007

¹⁰ <http://www.france24.com/fr/20111108-sarkozy-netanyahou-menteur-off-discussion-obama-israel-g20-cannes-journaliste-arret-sur-images>

¹¹ Trita Parsi (op cit p. 167) quotes an article by Barak Ravid in the Israeli paper *Haaretz* March 10, 2010 reporting the words of Netanyahu's brother-in-law about Obama: " When there is an anti-Semitic president in the United States, it is a test for us and we have to say: we will not concede. " adding "We are a nation dating back 4 000 years, and you in a year or two will be long forgotten. Who will remember you? But Jerusalem will dwell on forever."

As Ilan Pappé explained there are four pillars in the pro-Israel lobby. He gives a definition of the Israel lobby or pro-Israel lobby which is quite interesting: he includes four large groups in this lobby which he calls the "fundamentalist quartet": big oil, the military-industrial complex, AIPAC and Christian Zionists".¹² When the military-industrial complex is divided then the power of Israel or the pro-Israel lobby is diminished. The tension over Iran illustrates this clearly. The US military does not want a war with Iran nor, as General Dempsey said, does it want to be complicit in one.¹³ The defense sector might not agree with military leaders but clearly strong military opposition strengthens Obama's hand. Hence his balancing act at the UN in 2012: symbolic support for Israel but refusal to be sucked into a war. This is quite independent of personalities. George W. Bush who was very close to Israeli leaders also refused to go along with an attack on Iran in May 2008. The Israeli PM then was Olmert supposedly a more dovish leader while Bush was supposedly more hawkish than Obama.¹⁴

Thus the official US policy towards Iran cannot be said to be either the Israeli policy or the one chosen by Congress or even Obama or his advisers'. It is the result of several forces and that may explain why it is not very consistent. In spite of the Iranian leader's often inflammatory speeches, no one really thinks Iran would wipe Israel off the map but both Israel and the US have launched cyber-warfare attacks on Iran (stuxnet virus) and the US and Israel cooperate with MEK an Iranian group which until recently was considered to be a terrorist organization. The areas of agreement and disagreement between the US and Israel are thus intertwined: disagreement about intervention, or rather disagreement about public declarations advocating war for it is not certain that Netanyahu is really considering war but broad agreement about containing and weakening Iran, creating a de-facto coalition between Saudi Arabia and Israel, agreement about shifting the focus in the Middle East from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to Iran and its alleged nuclear programs.

The various factors leading to a policy are in constant interplay. Thus over Libya in 2011 Obama had the pressure of two allies France and Britain and the advice of three officials in his administration (Clinton, Rice, Slaughter) pointing in the same direction while his defense secretary (Gates) famously declared that anyone wanting an intervention ought to have his head examined.¹⁵ No one's head seems to have been examined for Obama came down on the side of intervention. Israel presumably was not a factor. Advisers often represent a key institution or powerful interest. Peter Beinart details the fights between Ross and Mitchell over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but they also represented different factions. Often the State Dpt and the defense Dpt are at odds and mobilize resources and allies to get their message across and triumph in cabinet battles. Each of the four pillars identified by Pappé may itself be torn between factions so instead of one man taking a decision in isolation like Obama is said to do when it comes to choosing a

¹² Found at <http://infomideast.com/wordpress/?p=434> a link which is no longer active. Pappé makes a similar point in "Clusters of history: US involvement in the Palestine question", *Race & Class January 2007* 48: 1-28

¹³ *The Guardian*, "Israeli attack on Iran 'would not stop nuclear programme'", August 31, 2012 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/30/israeli-attack-iran-not-stop-nuclear?newsfeed=true>

¹⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/sep/25/iran.israelandthepalestinians1>

¹⁵ "In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should 'have his head examined,' as General MacArthur so delicately put it," *The New York Times*, "Warning Against Wars Like Iraq and Afghanistan", Feb 25, 2011

targeted assassination a whole cast of people are involved in each decision process. Obama's preferences, which we can infer from his past and statements before he reached the White House, do not necessarily prevail.

Public opinion which, of course, should be paramount in a democracy, does have an impact though it is often minimal. The war in Afghanistan was very popular in 2001 for it was seen as an act of revenge for the 9/11 attacks, it is now unpopular. 11 years later with the US in a quagmire and a quandary public opinion has shifted. On Iraq public opinion followed the lies of the Bush administration then turned against the war. It is easy to manufacture consent on matters of foreign policy and changes happen with reversals of fortune on the ground. There is no strong anti-war movement in the US, a movement that Obama could turn to to say "make me do it" as FDR said in another context. The Iraq war ended with the US declaring victory after thousands of deaths and millions of wounded or displaced people. Iraq is now a pro-Iranian country with no democracy. Afghanistan is already in a state of chaos where American-trained Afghan troops kill American soldiers. The public is tired of these wars and therefore accepts Obama's shift to the use of drones to fight the so-called war on terror with different means. The policy has changed, drones instead of armed intervention and troops on the ground, and is presented as a zero-death solution for Americans. This new policy thus takes into account the situation on the ground but does not deviate from a general framework of global hegemony. It was not shaped by public opinion. It fosters as much anti-Americanism as the old one and reaffirms the perception of US dishonesty or hypocrisy when Obama's speeches are correlated with his actions. Once again "his" actions means what the foreign policy establishment collectively comes up with. The public does not loudly object to a policy which does not cause American deaths and is said to be economical. Yet in geopolitical terms this policy is detrimental as far as the image of the US and the fight against terrorism are concerned.

Last but not least among the actors shaping US foreign policy are foreign powers and geopolitical shifts among the nations of the world. The US, with France and Britain, easily convinced the UN Security Council that a resolution to protect populations in Libya was ethically and politically acceptable. Then, of course, the resolution was immediately violated and became a free pass for regime change in Libya. One year later Russia and China refused to go along with the West as far as Syria is concerned. Thus the US is forced to take into account the opposition of its main geopolitical rivals. It still provides weapons to the Syrian opposition, even if it includes members of Al Qaeda one of the organizations the US is fighting in the war on terror and in Afghanistan (which probably is responsible for the murder of its ambassador in Libya). It also has to take into account the power of the dictator in Syria, much greater than his counterpart's in Libya so it adapts its policy to the power relationship at the UN and on the ground, which is true of any nation. From this point of view there is no American exceptionalism. With Turkey the US had a major disagreement over the Gaza flotilla when Israel killed 9 activists on a Turkish boat yet it is closely working with this country over Syria. Allies and rivals are, as Rumsfeld argued, mostly determined by the mission or the issue.

Trita Parsi gives a very convincing description of the complexity of the decision making process in his analysis of US-Iran relations. Thus he writes:

But faced with overwhelming resistance from Israel, Congress, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab allies skeptics within his own administration and, most importantly, the actions of the Iranian government itself, the president's vision and political space were continually

compromised. In the end, the diplomacy Obama pursued was only a shadow of the engagement he had envisioned.¹⁶

Obama's personality and preferences are not the main factor at all. On top of all the factors already mentioned, the US has to take the power of China into account, it mostly explains its new diplomacy in the Far East but since China is emerging as a global power it impacts on other regions as well. The Chinese have not made the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a major issue so the US does not have to worry about strong Chinese support for the Palestinians, on the contrary the Chinese buy weapons from Israel, sometimes against the advice of the US. Yet on Iran, Russian and Chinese opposition is a factor in the choice of policy by the US: no direct intervention but sanctions and sabotage planned in the US and implemented by MEK. The US forms a duopoly with China and the two countries are both rivals and partners. The rising power of China coupled with the US relative economic decline will have consequences upon US foreign policy in every region of the world.

So each specific policy is determined by various actors, both domestic and global, and is likely to change if situations change. Thus the US supported all dictatorships in the Arab world until the Arab spring then it swung and claimed its support for this democratic uprising though for a while in Egypt it was closer to the army than to the protesters. The changes or swings though must be understood as different interpretations of the same score. The US desire for global hegemony has not disappeared but the means to try to achieve it keep changing. Drones replace boots on the ground, sabotage and support for opposition groups replace air bombardments; speeches and rhetoric change but still encounter realities on the ground.

It is easy to understand why there is a perception of Israel being the tail that wags the dog when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian problem: the US demands an end to settlement, Israel refuses, insults the US Vice-President¹⁷ and as a reward gets new weapons and credits. So the media talk about Netanyahu defeating Obama as if it were a boxing match and the leader of the small country were a David defeating a Goliath. Yet when all the factors are taken into account --and even if Obama were more forceful or more heedful of law-- things become more complex. If the US military opposes the Israeli leader then his hand is much weaker, if China and Russia support Iran then the US has to choose different ways to destabilize it. The lack of involvement of the US in the effective peace process between Israel and the Palestinians can also be explained by the relative lack of interest of much of the world for this issue. Even Saudi Arabia which produced a fair and balanced peace proposal in 2002¹⁸ which Israel and the US proceeded to ignore is currently more interested in containing Iranian and Shiite power than in solving the conflict in Palestine, thus it is a close ally of the US in spite of its being a theocratic dictatorship. Obama as the willing prisoner of the oligarchy in the US follows the main lines of force in US foreign policy, with a small margin for personal input. Obama's foreign policy, like his domestic policies, thus reflects his gauging of the power of various elements in "the Power Elite". As C. Wright Mills argued in the 50s: "For power is not of a man."¹⁹

¹⁶ *op cit.* p211-212

¹⁷ "When Israelis degrade Israel by humiliating Joe Biden", *Haaretz*, March 10, 2010
<http://www.haaretz.com/news/when-israelis-degrade-israel-by-humiliating-joe-biden-1.264406>

¹⁸ <http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/league/peace02.htm>

¹⁹ Pierre Guerlain, "La politique étrangère de l'administration Obama: continuités et contraintes", *Recherches Internationales*, N° 91, Juillet-Septembre 2011, pp. 121-150