

Assessing Continuity and Change in Obama's Foreign and National Security Policies

Written by Mark J. Miller

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MARK J. MILLER, FEB 5 2012

Most observers of the United States' engagement with the world are familiar with a number of realities. Continuity prevails over change from administration to administration. Domestic political considerations often figure centrally in what the United States does, often to the consternation of US statesmen like the late George C. Kennan. Most Americans know distressingly little about world affairs and many could care less. Readership of newspapers and magazines that offer adequate coverage of global events has declined precipitously as has viewership of reputable newscasts. American elected officials often display shocking ignorance of world affairs as witnessed recently by GOP presidential hopeful Governor Perry of Texas not knowing that Turkey belongs to NATO. Americans have become resigned to this state of affairs. My personal, professional vocation arose from a desire to alter this sorry picture.

Forty years later, little has changed. The nadir, of course, arrived in 2001 when George W. Bush assumed the presidency. Somehow I had underestimated just how dangerous and destructive the incoming president would be. I guess I thought that Ronald Regan was as bad as it could get. I was wrong.

Maybe this is where the assessment ought to begin. Each US president leaves a legacy to his successor. Obama inherited a nightmare. To his immense credit, he somehow steered the US through the worst of the financial crisis. Three years later, the US economy remains in trouble and unemployment is unacceptably high. These continuing woes will cost Obama votes in his bid for reelection. And it seems clear that far more federal stimulus was needed, just as *New York Times* columnist and professor Paul Krugman and others had argued. But the votes were not there in Congress. Obama emerged as a pragmatist and a very careful, almost conservative, one at that. Obama's speeches could and did inspire hope for fundamental change, especially in US policy in the Middle East. But in diplomacy and politics in general, deeds matter much more than words. President Obama understands this. He proceeds cautiously and carefully in marked contrast to his predecessor.

When Obama came into office, the US was engaged in two Middle Eastern wars. The new president was intent on ending the enormously costly misadventure in Iraq. Slowly, perhaps too slowly, he has been able to largely disengage from the Iraq conflict without being blamed, at least not yet, for having lost Iraq. The outcome of the Iraq fiasco will emerge in coming years. In the meantime, the Obama administration has largely succeeded in repairing badly frayed relations with much of Europe and the Middle East. The Iraq war proved a self-inflicted and totally unnecessary disaster on the scale of Vietnam. Why did it not elicit protests in the US on the level of anti-Vietnam war movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s? Although there were several anti-war marches, the protests constituted a faint echo of the War at Home during the Vietnam era, which hastened an end to the conflict. Something fundamentally had changed. Was it simply the absence of military conscription? The stunning apathy of Americans and American intellectuals contrasted sharply with reactions in Europe. Mercifully, the embedded roots of transatlantic ties withstood a severe test and the election of Obama alone constituted an immense boon to U.S. foreign and national security policy. That achievement endures still today.

Legacies from predecessors often box in new presidents. President Obama, I fear, has been boxed in more than most. This was apparent in President Obama's handling of Afghanistan. He was right to brand Al-Qaeda as the chief

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enemy and to refocus on Afghanistan. His doing away with the War on Terrorism began to unravel the specious conflation of his predecessor which so exaggerated the threat posed by Al-Qaeda-style militants. The War on Terrorism in fact was a primarily domestic political gambit foisted by the neo-conservative inner circle on an overly traumatized American public to enable the reelection of Bush in 2004. It worked and the result was four more years of sheer hell although, to his credit, President Bush did moderate some of his worst policies and, for example, at least tried to patch up relations in Europe.

As recounted in Woodward's *Obama's Wars*, when Obama turned to the Afghanistan dossier, he was given few palatable options by his military advisors. Increasing US troops on the ground appeared almost inevitable, in part because a downturn of troops on the ground did not appear a viable option, at least not at the time. So, General Petraus got another surge and casualties rose. Unwise conflation of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban deepened the morass. The vast expenditure of lives and resources on a unwinnable conflict taxed US relations with key NATO allies and heightened the war weariness of average Americans, most of whom could not identify Afghanistan on a map.

The killing of Osama Bin Laden helped open up a way out. The US had achieved its goal of largely destroying Al-Qaeda which never consisted of more than a few thousand, largely ragtag although potentially dangerous, militants. President Obama began a gradual drawdown of US and NATO troops that was to continue until 2014, but may happen earlier, hastened by a precipitous French exit. In the meantime, hope for some kind of regional settlement flickers from time to time. But the outlines of the endgame in Afghanistan remain obscure. Most remaining US troops will inevitably leave as will other NATO ally troops who have also suffered grievously in another of America's misbegotten wars. Former Secretary of Defense Gates, a holdover from the George W. Bush administration, wisely warned his fellow Americans of the dangers of US involvement in future ground wars in Asia upon his retirement. Curiously, the lessons of the Korean conflict that had figured in US debates over US involvement in Vietnam in the 1950 and 1960s appeared all but forgotten. Historians always warn about leaders not heeding history, but not only in the US' case, those warnings too often pass unheeded.

And then there remains the Arab/Israeli imbroglio. Tragedy is more apt a term. Longtime advocates of Palestinian statehood and a two state solution like me dared to hope for a more sensible and constructive US policy toward the conflict would result. We were encouraged that President Obama had come to know, and apparently befriended, Professor Rachid Khalidi, then at the University of Chicago. Obama made it known that he favored a two state solution. His predecessor, of course, had in fact declared the creation of a Palestinian state in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza to be a goal of US policy at long last. But Bush fell into lockstep with Sharon and the Israelis on the War on Terrorism, and everything that transpired served to undermine progress towards the announced goal.

Would Obama be different? At first, it seemed likely. The new president made a series of well-received speeches in various Middle Eastern venues. He appointed former Senator George Mitchell to overlook the Arab/Israeli peace process. It seemed that the new president aspired to reset Iran-US relations, perhaps as part of a strategy to find a regional solution to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan that would facilitate a US exit from those conflicts without losing face.

Those fleeting high hopes soon encountered the harsh realities of American political life, namely the pro-Israel lobby. There have been a number of interesting books on the lobby and US involvement in the Middle East in recent years. Mersheimer and Walt's *The Israel Lobby* predictably received enormous derision in certain journals not known for objectivity on Arab/Israeli matters. Nevertheless, I have unfailingly assigned it to successive Arab/Israeli conflict courses that I teach and my students appear to find the book sensible and insightful. I have been teaching that particular course for thirty-four years. I think the course attracts some of the better students at the University of Delaware, and over that protracted period of observation, I can vouch that the vast majority of University of Delaware students are quite fair-minded about Arab/Israeli conflict once they master the history of that conflict.

The problem stems from the pro-Israeli lobby. In Geoffrey Wayro's *Quicksand: America's Pursuit of Power in the Middle East*, he engages in a comprehensive review of the history of US involvement in the Middle East. He discerns

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a pattern of US domestic politics shaping US interactions with the Middle East from the time of President Wilson onward. He documents how one US president after another has prioritized domestic, political considerations, overall the Jewish vote in key states with large blocs of electoral college votes, which resulted in pro-Zionist and later pro-Israeli US policies. Wayro sensibly suggests that this longstanding state of affairs has not served US interests in the Middle East. Does the Obama administration fit the pattern?

Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that it does. Indeed, in some respects, the Obama administration appears to be one of the most pro-Israeli administrations in US history despite a widespread perception in Israel and amongst pro-Israeli observers in the US and world-wide that Obama is somehow less than supportive of Israel. This conclusion pains me deeply as I had dared to hope that the administration might actually do something to relieve the Palestinian plight. The evidence suggests otherwise.

My hopes had largely unraveled by the end of 2010. The reset with Iran quickly went sour. The conduct of the Iranian regime, of course, did not help matters. But the irrational obsession with the possibility that Iran could produce a nuclear weapon that potentially could pose an existential threat to Israel prevailed. The script was well-worn. Every Middle Eastern leader of stature who dares to displease Israel becomes a Hitler figure. The threat posed is always existential, and every measure short of war or some form of bellicosity constitutes another Munich. Israel and its advocates will do their utmost to ensure that the US aligns itself four-square with Israel. Other interests of the US pale in significance. Ahmadinejad became yet another Nasser, although I too reject Ahmadinejad's most outrageous remarks.

Presented with opportunities to do something on behalf of Middle East peace, the Obama administration largely stumbled along, never willing to confront an Israeli government set on the expansion of settlements and other measures that will greatly diminish the prospect of creating a Palestinian state.

A key indicator of how the wind was blowing came at the OECD's admission of Israel to full membership. The US could have leaned on the Israelis to finally define their boundaries, but to my knowledge, did not do so. Curiously, other OECD member states did not perceive the Israeli demarche as an opportunity to achieve a two state solution. This constituted a major missed opportunity and, in reality, ill served Israel's long-term interests.

Sadly, the Obama administration has buckled under like most of its predecessors, save perhaps Eisenhower. I simply cannot take the time right now to develop why I think the inability of the US to help Israel to achieve a two state solution in fact endangers Israel. See Ian Lustick's recent article in *Israel Studies Review* "Israel's Migration Balance" for something akin to my point of view. I do know that there are many, many like-minded scholars here whose perspectives seem to bear little on outcomes in the Middle East. Sorry to come across as embittered and depressed, but my feelings reflect a state of affairs that has changed little under President Obama. I fear that I am not alone in feeling this way. I am terribly worried that Israel will precipitate yet another conflagration by bombing Iran. There are ample grounds to worry about the mental health of Netanyahu, Barak, and Ahmadinejad. For a broader perspective on the question that is the concern of this essay, see my co-edited *National Security Under Obama* recently published by Palgrave Macmillan.

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