

## OBAMA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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**Abstract:** This article provides an overview of the Obama administration's policies in the Middle East. At the outset, its priorities were to reduce the American role in the region and promote peace between Israelis and Palestinians. The Arab Spring introduced a number of new and novel issues that the administration had to confront. For the most part, Obama failed to reach his goals, so the final section seeks to contextualize and explain those failures.

**Keywords:** Barack Obama, Middle East, Arab Spring, Middle East peace

### INTRODUCTION

Barack Obama inherited a difficult situation in the Middle East in 2009: a war in Iraq that he wanted to end, a stalled peace process between Israelis and Palestinians that he wanted to revive, and deteriorating regional opinions about the United States that we wanted to reverse. There were ongoing concerns about terrorism and Iran's nuclear program (considered elsewhere in this volume). The Arab Spring and its course in different countries created important new issues. This article provides a brief overview of the Obama administration's response to these issues. It is divided into four sections. The first compares the broad outlines of Obama's Middle East policies with those of his predecessors. The second examines two of the administration's early priorities, withdrawal from Iraq and promotion of peace between Israel and the Palestinians, while the third examines its responses to the unexpected and unprecedented changes caused by the Arab Spring. The second and third sections will be largely descriptive, so the fourth is a discussion and evaluation of the administration's policies. Great reliance will be placed on the words of the President and other administration officials throughout the article, to allow them to describe their debates about contentious policy issues, defend their decisions, and interpret the results.

## OBAMA AND THE HISTORICAL PATTERN OF AMERICAN POLICY

In a recent survey of the history of American relations with the Middle East since World War II,<sup>1</sup> Joel Migdal identifies two general patterns. First, the desire of Presidents to reduce U.S. involvement in favor of more important issues or regions, but their inability to do so in the face of significant regional change and/or conflict: it seemed that “no president could escape the volatility and centrality of the Middle East,” because the region was “a black hole sucking the United States in, whether its leaders wanted to be or not.” Second, notwithstanding that pattern, Presidents sought to minimize the U.S. military’s presence in the region, in particular on the ground.<sup>2</sup>

Obama’s policies adhere to this general pattern. He “came to office with a conviction that reducing the United States’ massive military and political involvement in the Middle East was a vital national security interest in its own right.”<sup>3</sup> His primary policy concerns at the outset were domestic, i.e., the domestic economy following the 2008 economic crisis and national health care. In foreign affairs, he hoped to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and to “pivot” American foreign policy from the Middle East to Asia, because, as a senior State Department official explained, “We’ve been on a little bit of a Middle East detour over the course of the least ten years. And our future will be dominated utterly and fundamentally by developments in the Asian and the Pacific region.”<sup>4</sup> The new President gave a major speech in Cairo in June 2009 in which he outlined his priorities, identified ways the United States would reduce its presence in the region, and identified policies to increase American popularity. He began by stating “I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world.” To do so, the United States would not keep its troops in Iraq or establish bases there after December 2011, would not actively promote democracy, would not engage in torture, and would close the prison at Guantanamo Bay. The only regional issue on which Obama promised greater American attention was in trying to achieve peace between Israel and the Palestinians, but any success in that process would further improve America’s image in the Muslim world.<sup>5</sup> Yet despite his best intentions, Obama was unable to dramatically reduce America’s concern about or involvement in the region, due, in part, to the Arab

<sup>1</sup> J.S. Migdal, *Shifting Sands: The United States and the Middle East*, New York 2014.

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Migdal, *op. cit.*, pp. 301–322, quoted at p. 303; See also: S. Simon, J. Stevenson, *The End of Pax Americana: Why Washington’s Middle East Pullback Makes Sense*, “Foreign Affairs” 2015, available online: [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/end-pax-americana](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/end-pax-americana) (15.02.2017).

<sup>3</sup> M. Lynch, *Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role*, “Foreign Affairs” 2015, available online: [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/obama-and-middle-east](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/obama-and-middle-east) (13.02.2017).

<sup>4</sup> K. Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs, quoted in: F. A. Gerges, *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America’s Moment?*, Houndmills 2012, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> White House, *Text: Obama’s Speech in Cairo*, “New York Times” 4.06.2009, available online: [www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html) (9.12.2014).

Spring and the success of the Islamic State. As with his predecessors, Obama's presidency "proves the rule..." that "developments internal to the Middle East imposed themselves" on the President's priorities and altered his policies.<sup>6</sup>

Obama was more successful in his efforts to reduce the presence of the U.S. military in the region. There were 142,000 U.S. troops in Iraq at the outset of his presidency, but that number was reduced to zero by December 2011. American ground forces have returned to Iraq to combat the Islamic State, but the number was far fewer, less than 5,000 at the end of his term. Obama resisted widespread calls for military action in Syria and, while he did use the American military to respond to the uprising in Libya, it was American airpower, not ground troops, that were used.<sup>7</sup> Instead of traditional means of military power, a signature instrument for Obama has been the use of drones. He justified these, in part, as preferable to deployment of large numbers of conventional troops, the use of which would "lead us to be viewed as occupying armies, unleash a torrent of unintended consequences... and ultimately empower those who thrive on violent conflict." While drone strikes were most frequent in Pakistan and Afghanistan, i.e., countries outside the Middle East, there were at least 144 strikes in Yemen during Obama's presidency and at least 32 in Somalia. The U.S. has also used drone strikes in Syria and Libya. Additional military efforts short of using ground troops were greater use of special operations forces and efforts to train local militaries as alternatives to sending ground troops.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE INITIAL PRIORITIES: IRAQ AND ISRAEL

*The Withdrawal From Iraq* Obama's first regional priority was ending the American military presence in Iraq. The Bush administration had actually helped achieve that goal when, under pressure from the Iraqi government, it had agreed to a schedule for American withdrawal: American troops would leave Iraqi cities by the summer of 2009 and all troops would leave the country by the end of 2011.<sup>9</sup> This still left several issues for Obama: the date for the withdrawal

<sup>6</sup> F.A. Gerges, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>7</sup> M.E. O'Hanlon, J.H. Campbell, *The Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Security & Reconstruction in Post-Saddam Iraq*, Brookings Institution, March 2009, available online [www.brookings.edu/iraqindex](http://www.brookings.edu/iraqindex) (02.02.2017); D. Jervis, *Trying to Understand America's Nobel Prize-Winning War-Fighting President* (unpublished conference paper, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> White House, *Obama's Speech on Drone Policy*, "New York Times", 23.05.2013, available online: [www.nytimes.com/2013/05/24/us/politics/transcript-of-obamas-speech-on-drone-policy.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/24/us/politics/transcript-of-obamas-speech-on-drone-policy.html) (14.02.2017); J. Serle, J. Purkiss, *Get the Data: Drone Wars*, Bureau of Investigative Journalism, available online: [www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs/](http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs/) (14.02.2017); J. Stern, *Obama and Terrorism: Like It or Not, the War Goes On*, "Foreign Affairs" 2015, available online: [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/obama-and-terrorism](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/obama-and-terrorism) (21.02.2017).

<sup>9</sup> S. Farrell, *U.S. combat troops would leave Iraq by 2011 under draft agreement*, "New York Times" 22.08.2008, available online: [www.nytimes.com/2008/08/22/world/africa/22iht-troops](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/22/world/africa/22iht-troops).

of combat troops, the number of forces that would remain in the country between that date and December 2011, and the possibility of keeping some forces in Iraq after December 2011. Reflecting the priority given to this issue, Obama asked the military for options about the date for withdrawal of combat troops at his first National Security Council meeting. Three options were soon proposed: a twenty-three-month withdrawal period, until December 2010, one that Secretary of Defense Robert Gates believed provided for “the lowest level of risks and the highest probability of achieving our objectives,” a nineteen-month period of withdraw, through August 2010, that would “meet most but not all requirements for development of the Iraqi security forces,” and a sixteen-month period, through May 2010, as Obama had proposed in the 2008 campaign, that would create an “extremely high risk” to accomplishing the mission. Obama decided to accept the August 2010 date. As for the number of troops remaining in the country, Obama decided upon 35–50,000—slightly lower than the military wanted—to continue to train Iraqi forces, protect Americans, and engage in counterterrorism activities.<sup>10</sup>

With the withdrawal of combat troops, “mentally, America withdrew” from Iraq.<sup>11</sup> This was certainly true in the State Department where, according to Christopher Hill, the U.S. ambassador from April 2009–August 2010, Iraq had the “bureaucratic reputation as a loser, something to stay away from” and “it was increasingly clear that Iraq remained the military’s problem, not the State Department’s.” To illustrate, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Iraq only once and did not give the country extended discussion in her memoirs. Washington’s primary interest became preserving the long-term strategic relationship between the countries, a goal that focused more on stability there than promoting political reform. For instance, it worked diligently to establish a power-sharing government after the inconclusive 2010 parliamentary elections, pressing the need for rule by the incumbent Shiite candidate, Nouri al-Maliki, over Ayad Allawi, believing that stability required a Shiite leader.<sup>12</sup>

The continued presence of American troops after December 2011 would serve as another source of stability. There was general agreement, especially among

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4.15557880.html (17.12.2016); G. Bruno, *U.S. Security Agreements and Iraq*, “Council on Foreign Relations” 17.11.2008, available online: [www.cfr.org/iraq/us-security-agreements-iraq/p16448#p6](http://www.cfr.org/iraq/us-security-agreements-iraq/p16448#p6) (17.12.2016).

<sup>10</sup> R.M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, New York 2014, pp. 324–326; White House, *Remarks of President Barack Obama – Responsibly Ending the War in Iraq*, 27.02.2009, available online: [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-ndash-responsibly-ending-war-iraq](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-ndash-responsibly-ending-war-iraq) (13.04.2016).

<sup>11</sup> J. Mann, *The Obamians: The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power*, New York 2012, p. 119.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in: C. R. Hill, *How the Obama Administration Ignored Iraq: One ambassador’s story of an exit strategy gone wrong*, “Politico” 2.10.2014, available online: [www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/10/how-the-obama-administration-disowned-iraq-111565](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/10/how-the-obama-administration-disowned-iraq-111565) (09.04.2016); see also, C.R. Hill, *Outpost: Life on the Frontlines of American Diplomacy: A Memoir*, New York 2014, pp. 342–391.

military leaders in the two countries, that this would be necessary, but politics intruded in both, making the negotiations difficult and, ultimately, a failure. As one observer remarked, “From the beginning, the talks unfolded in a way where they [were] largely driven by domestic political concerns, both in Washington and Baghdad. Both sides let politics drive the process, rather than security concerns.” The White House was also relatively uninterested and did not take an active role in the talks.<sup>13</sup>

If U.S. troops were to remain, two issues had to be decided: how many troops would stay and would the Iraqis be willing to accept them? The number of residual troops that Obama was willing to authorize was reduced through the course of 2011. The military had initially estimated that 15–20,000 would be needed, a number that was far too high for the White House. A preliminary decision was made in May that 10,000 troops would remain, but Obama did not share this number with the Iraqis. He did not want to indicate publicly how many troops the U.S. would authorize for fear of conveying to the U.S. public that he was in favor of a continued troop presence and in the belief that the Iraqis would request fewer troops. Obama also insisted that the Iraqis formally ask for a continued presence of U.S. troops by August 1, a condition that Iraqis found hard to meet. As Ambassador Hill later noted, “I’m not sure the Iraqis were entirely committed or entirely honest about saying whether they wanted troops or not.”<sup>14</sup> By the time Prime Minister Maliki sort-of asked for U.S. troops in early August, the White House had begun to consider a far smaller number of residual troops in the country, citing budgetary concerns, a more limited mission, and an intelligence assessment that there would not be chaos after an American troop withdrawal. Ultimately, in mid-August, Obama reduced the proposed number of remaining forces to 3,500 who would remain permanently with another 1,500 being rotated in.

With the decision made about troop numbers, the next issue was the need to conclude a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the Iraqis. SOFAs provide the legal context within which U.S. forces can operate in a foreign country, establishing the rights and privileges of U.S. personnel. A SOFA was in place for the period before December 31, 2011, and Obama insisted that any new SOFA should have the same immunities. Moreover, he insisted that the SOFA be approved by the Iraqi parliament. This was a very high hurdle, because the Iraqi people were very jealous of their newly-won sovereignty. Further difficulties arose when a leading Iraqi opposition party linked approval to two unrelated issues. In the

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<sup>13</sup> J. Rogin, *How the Obama administration bungled the Iraq withdrawal negotiations*, “Foreign Policy” 2011, available online: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/21/how-the-obama-administration-bungled-the-iraq-withdrawal-negotiations/> (13.04.2016); L. Panetta, *Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace*, New York 2014, pp. 392–393.

<sup>14</sup> C. Hill quoted in: M. Crowley, *Who Lost Iraq?* “Politico” July/August 2015, available online: <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/06/iraq-roundtable-george-w-bush-barack-obama-119221> (09.04.2016).

end, there was no parliamentary agreement, and Obama and Maliki announced a total withdrawal of U.S. troops in mid-October.<sup>15</sup>

*Israeli-Palestinian Peace* A second priority at the outset of Obama's term was to establish peace between Israelis and Palestinians. The President argued in this Cairo speech this was in the interests of Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans, and that he intended to "personally pursue this outcome with all the patience that the task requires."<sup>16</sup> There were two sustained efforts and a final fleeting effort to promote peace during the Obama presidency. The first sustained effort coincided with Obama's early years in office, roughly from March 2009 through September 2010, and the second from roughly July 2013 through April 2014, early in John Kerry's term as Secretary of State. The third effort has only recently been revealed and occurred early in 2016. In the initial efforts, the U.S. had trouble getting the parties to talk with each other, much less engage in the serious discussions that might lead to peace. In both of the sustained efforts, the U.S. pressed Israel to make concessions, specifically halting construction of settlements on the West Bank, actions the U.S. had long viewed as impediments to peace, and in both, the American effort failed. As a result, U.S.-Israeli relations deteriorated.

Obama first pressed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for a settlement freeze during his May 2009 visit to Washington. Obama's logic was that the Palestinians had to see tangible progress prior to entering negotiations rather than simply the promise of tangible progress, a promise often not realized. Netanyahu was resistant, only agreeing to a temporary, ten-month freeze, in November 2009, and one with many exceptions. Netanyahu's willingness to ignore the pleadings of the American president was further illustrated in March 2010 when, during a visit by Vice President Joe Biden, Israel announced a doubling in size of an existing settlement in East Jerusalem. Obama reacted furiously, considering that announcement to be a "slap in the face." Still, the U.S. continued to work for a settlement freeze, going so far in the fall of 2010 as to offer the Israelis rewards for a mere three-month freeze. Specifically, the U.S. offered to sell advanced fighter planes to Israel, to oppose Palestinian membership in the United Nations, to offer long-term security guarantees if a peace deal were negotiated, and to never request another settlement freeze. In effect, a "White House that had taken office determined to take a harder line against settlements than its predecessors was now offering to

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<sup>15</sup> T. Arango, M. S. Schmidt, *Despite Difficult Talks, U.S. and Iraq Had Expected Some American Troops to Stay*, "New York Times" 21.10. 2011, available online: [www.nytimes.com/2011/10/22/world/middleeast/united-states-and-iraq-had-not-expected-troops-would-have-to-leave.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/22/world/middleeast/united-states-and-iraq-had-not-expected-troops-would-have-to-leave.html?_r=0) (13.04.2016); Rogin, *op. cit.*; see also: M.R. Gordon, B.E. Trainer, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, From George W. Bush to Barack Obama*, New York 2013, pp. 652–674.

<sup>16</sup> F.A. Gerges, *op. cit.*, p. 116; M. Landler, *Seasoned Diplomat to Serve as a Mideast Envoy*, "New York Times" 21.01.2009, available online: [www.nytimes.com/2009/01/22/us/politics/22diplo.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/22/us/politics/22diplo.html) (21.03.2015).

reward Israel for them in a way that no administration ever had.” Still, the Israelis were not interested in a settlement freeze, and the Palestinians were not interested in talks in the absence of a freeze.<sup>17</sup>

That was the context when Kerry began his peace initiative. He believed it was urgent to act, because “the window for a two-state solution is shutting,” that “...we have some period of time—a year and a half to two years—or it’s over,” and that the situation “is getting worse. It is moving in the wrong direction.”<sup>18</sup> He first sought the ambitious goal of achieving an agreement on the major divisive issues, a most unlikely prospect, and then merely on getting the two sides to continue to talk. That goal was also not achieved, and while there are many reasons for those failures, continued Israeli settlement activity was one: four times more settlements were authorized during this nine-month peace effort than had been the case in the years just prior to the peace initiative. Despite Kerry’s initiatives, this effort failed in the spring of 2014, soon to be followed by another Gaza war, further reducing chances for peace while at the same time demonstrating the need for a diplomatic solution to the problem. By early 2015 Netanyahu was emphasizing the Iranian nuclear issue rather than Israeli-Palestinian peace and promised during his March 2015 re-election campaign that there would be no Palestinian state.<sup>19</sup>

Kerry’s final effort occurred in late 2015-early 2016. At first, it was a response to Prime Minister Netanyahu’s proposals to grant concessions to the Palestinians in return for U.S. endorsement of continued settlement construction, but the Israeli prime minister soon withdrew the proposals. Angry and frustrated, Kerry nonetheless persisted and developed principles for a regional peace framework that included secure borders, a Palestinian state, negotiated solutions to the Palestinian refugee problem and the issue of Jerusalem, and consideration of Israel’s security concerns. In an effort to push the ideas forward, Kerry and Netanyahu agreed to a secret meeting with Egypt’s leader Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and King Abdullah of Jordan. Kerry negotiated with the two Arab leaders prior to the meeting and also arranged to get support from other Arab states, even though it included the

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<sup>17</sup> F.A. Gerges, *op. cit.*, pp. 119–127; Quotation in: P. Beinart, *Obama Betrayed Ideals on Israel*, “Newsweek” 12.03.2012, available online: [www.newsweek.com/peter-beinart-obama-betrayed-ideals-israel-63673](http://www.newsweek.com/peter-beinart-obama-betrayed-ideals-israel-63673) (16.05.2015).

<sup>18</sup> Kerry quoted in: K. Gilsinan, *Is it Too Late to Save the Two-State Solution?* “The Atlantic” 4.12.2016, available online: [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/12/john-kerry-jeffrey-goldberg-israel-saban-forum/509510/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/12/john-kerry-jeffrey-goldberg-israel-saban-forum/509510/) (24.02.2017).

<sup>19</sup> A.D. Miller, *John Kerry, Lone Ranger of the Middle East*, “Foreign Affairs” 25.06.2013, available online: [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2013-06-25/john-kerry-lone-ranger-middle-east](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2013-06-25/john-kerry-lone-ranger-middle-east) (02.05.2015); W. Booth, R. Eglash, *Kerry’s nine-month quest for Middle East peace ends in failure*, “Washington Post” 29.04. 2014, available online: [www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/kerrys-nine-month-quest-for-middle-east-peace-ends-in-failure/2014/04/29/56521cd6-cfd7-11e3-a714-be7e7f142085\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/kerrys-nine-month-quest-for-middle-east-peace-ends-in-failure/2014/04/29/56521cd6-cfd7-11e3-a714-be7e7f142085_story.html) (02.05.2015); The Economist, *A peace process that is going nowhere: John Kerry’s dogged bid for a two-state solution has faltered*, “Economist” 12.04.2014, available online: [www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21600710-john-kerrys-dogged-bid-two-state-solution-has-faltered-peace-process](http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21600710-john-kerrys-dogged-bid-two-state-solution-has-faltered-peace-process) (02.05.2015).

recognition of Israel. The four-way meeting between Kerry, Netanyahu, Abdullah, and al-Sisi took place on February 21, 2016. In the end, nothing came of the initiative. Netanyahu would not make a commitment, arguing that the proposals were too broad and doubting if he could get his coalition government to approve. Abdullah and Sisi shared those doubts.<sup>20</sup>

By the end of Obama's tenure, there was much American frustration with the parties. In an October 2016 interview, Kerry lamented the "constant elusiveness of peace between Israel and Palestine" as one of the regrets of his tenure. A major reason was that "You have to have willing partners to complete an agreement. You have to want to get to yes. And there are serious questions about whether either side wanted to get there at that moment."<sup>21</sup> His frustration was further illustrated by the December 2016 decision to abstain on a UN Security Council resolution dealing with Israeli/Palestinian peace. The abstention was a first for the Obama administration; previously it had persuaded sponsors of resolutions critical of Israel to withdraw them or, when necessary, as in 2011, to veto them. In this case, the U.S. worked actively with the resolution's sponsors, especially New Zealand and Egypt, to make it more balanced and not one that was simply critical of Israel. Thus, the resolution urged Palestinian leaders to try to halt inflammatory rhetoric and violence against civilians, but the most noteworthy elements were its criticisms of Israeli settlement policy: it had "no legal validity and constitutes a flagrant violation under international law and a major obstacle to the achievement of the two-state solution and a just, lasting and comprehensive peace." Although there was extensive Israeli criticism of the U.S. decision, this text was identical or nearly identical to resolutions the U.S. had supported in the 1970s and 1980s. According to the White House, the abstention reflected not so much a change in America's policies as a change in Israel's, with increasing settlement activity and Netanyahu saying his government was more committed to settlements than any previous one in Israel's history. Kerry justified the American abstention in a speech several days later. Returning to his concern about prospects for a two-state solution, he stated that the decision to abstain had been taken to "save the two-state solution while there was still time," because the "status quo is leading toward one state and perpetual occupation."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> B. Ravid, *Exclusive: Kerry Offered Netanyahu Regional Peace Plan in Secret 2016 Summit with al-Sissi, King Abdullah*, "Haaretz" 19.02.2017, available online: [www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.772531?=&ts=1487969163123](http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.772531?=&ts=1487969163123) (24.02.2017).

<sup>21</sup> J. Tepperman, *The Envoy: A Conversation With John Kerry*, "Foreign Affairs" 17.10.2016, available online: [www.foreignaffairs.com/interviews/2016-10-17/envoy](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/interviews/2016-10-17/envoy) (06.02.2017).

<sup>22</sup> Resolution quoted in: B. Avishai, *A Significant Resolution on Israel*, "The New Yorker" 27.12.2016, available online: [www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-significant-resolution-on-israel](http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-significant-resolution-on-israel) (15.02.2017); K. De Young, *How the US came to abstain on a resolution condemning Israel settlements*, "Washington Post" 28.12.2016, available online: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/how-the-us-came-to-abstain-on-a-un-resolution-condemning-israeli-settlements/2016/12/28/fed102ee-cd38-11e6-b8a2-8c2a61b0436f\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.3412d8c13f13](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/how-the-us-came-to-abstain-on-a-un-resolution-condemning-israeli-settlements/2016/12/28/fed102ee-cd38-11e6-b8a2-8c2a61b0436f_story.html?utm_term=.3412d8c13f13) (15.02.2017); D.E. Sanger, *Kerry Rebukes Israel, Calling Settlements a Threat*



## NEW ISSUES: THE ARAB SPRING

*Removal of Autocrats in Egypt and Libya* If Obama was prepared to deal with troop withdrawals from Iraq and Israeli/Palestinian peace, he—like most leaders in the West—was unprepared for the Arab Spring. He did recognize the problems in the region, ordering a policy review in August 2010—because there was “evidence of growing citizen discontent with the region’s regimes” and “our regional and international credibility will be undermined if we are seen or perceived to be backing repressive regimes and ignoring the rights and aspirations of citizens”—but the review was not a priority and was only finished in late 2010, after the beginning of protests in Tunisia that would lead to the Arab Spring. Given this lack of preparation and the magnitude and complexity of the issues, the American response varied from country to country, based on considerations such as the state of relations with the threatened autocrat, the likelihood that he might be overthrown, whether the opposition movement would be able to govern and would be reformist once the autocrat was overthrown, and any new regime’s likely attitude toward the U.S.<sup>23</sup> Two cases will be considered here, Egypt and Libya. In both cases, the Obama administration acted expeditiously and decisively, although not without significant internal debates, to call for the removal of long-standing leaders. However, the means chosen to achieve that objective were very different. After the autocrat was overthrown, in contrast, the administration was much slower in deciding what to do and much less active.

Egypt is the more interesting of the two cases, because it was ruled by Hosni Mubarak, a long-time American friend. Protests against Mubarak began on January 25, 2011 and soon developed into the largest pro-democracy demonstrations in Arab history. This case raised difficult issues for the U.S., and Obama’s advisers were divided. Gates, Clinton, and Biden were wary of pressing Mubarak to leave, fearing the damage to American interests in the region, the impact of pressure on Mubarak upon other regional friends, and the danger of too rapid a transition to a new government. Others, typically younger and in the White House, argued that this was a historic opportunity, that a failure to act would put Obama on the wrong side of history and undermine the hope that had been generated by his Cairo speech. Obama quickly decided, within four days after the beginning of the protests, that Mubarak would have to leave office. He contacted the Egyptian leader and urged him to find a graceful way to depart, but Mubarak remained obstinate.

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*to Peace*, “New York Times” 28.12.2016, available online: [www.nytimes.com/2016/12/28/us/politics/john-kerry-israel-palestine-peace.html?emc=edit\\_ee\\_20161229&nl=todaysheadlines-europe&nid=50747882&r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/28/us/politics/john-kerry-israel-palestine-peace.html?emc=edit_ee_20161229&nl=todaysheadlines-europe&nid=50747882&r=1) (06.02.2016).

<sup>23</sup> Obama’s memo quoted in: R. Lizza, *The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring remade Obama’s foreign policy*, “The New Yorker” 2.05.2011, available online: [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist) (29.03.2016); M.L. Haas, *The United States and the Arab Spring: Threats and Opportunities in a Revolutionary Era* [in:] *The Middle East and the United States*, D.W. Lasch, M. L. Haas (eds), Boulder 2014, pp. 511–520.

Obama then became more assertive, publicly stating that “An orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now.”<sup>24</sup> Mubarak eventually left power on February 11, just eighteen days after the protests began.

This is a curious and surprising case, the US pushing for an ally’s departure from power. There are probably two reasons why it did so. One was that Mubarak would be unable to weather the storm of protests against his government and continuing American support for him would hurt relations with the new regime. Moreover, the U.S. had very strong ties with the Egyptian military, a pro-American institution that had received billions of dollars in American aid and would likely play a major role in any post-Mubarak government. In effect, what happened to Mubarak was not a “betrayal,” but rather “a calculated move by Obama to cut his losses: Mubarak had become a liability to the United States and there was a pro-American alternative in place.”<sup>25</sup>

Regarding Libya, once protests began the U.S. acted quickly and called for Muammar Qaddafi’s removal from office. This is a less surprising decision; while Qaddafi had begun to cooperate with the U.S. on proliferation and counterterrorism issues, he had a lengthy history of anti-Americanism and involvement in terrorism. Protests began against the Libyan leader on February 15, and the U.S. publicly called for his removal in February 27: Clinton argued he had “lost the legitimacy to govern,” and it is “now time for Qaddafi to go.”<sup>26</sup> There were, however, two important differences in the Libyan case. The U.S. had little contact with or leverage over Libyan institutions and Qaddafi was determined to remain in power, even if that meant killing large numbers of protesters. This led many countries, led by Britain and France, to advocate United Nations action to protect Libyan civilians.

Obama’s advisers were divided about this proposal. Some, e.g., Biden, Gates, and Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were very opposed. Gates was particularly outspoken, arguing that any military action would be an act of war with unforeseen consequences. He also did not believe that U.S. should initiate military action against a third Muslim country within a decade, asking, “Can I just finish the two wars we’re already in before you go looking for new ones.”<sup>27</sup> Other insiders supported military action. Susan Rice, the American ambassador to the United Nations, and Samantha Power, a member of the National Security Council staff, both of whom were students of American inaction during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, were active supporters. So, too, eventually, was the Secretary

<sup>24</sup> Obama quoted in: Lizza, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Quote taken from: M. Dunne, *Egypt: From Stagnation to Revolution*, [in:] *America’s Challenges in the Great Middle East: The Obama Administration’s Policies*, S. Akbarzadeh (ed.), Houndmills, UK 2011, pp. 84–88; see also: H. Cooper, M. Landler, D. E. Sanger, *In U.S. Signals to Egypt, Obama Straddled a Rift*, “New York Times” 12.02.2011, available online: [www.nytimes.com/2011/02/13/world/middleeast/13diplomacy.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/13/world/middleeast/13diplomacy.html) (09.02.2017).

<sup>26</sup> H.R. Clinton, *Hard Choices*, New York 2014, p. 297.

<sup>27</sup> Lizza, *op. cit.*; Gates, *op. cit.*, pp. 511–512.

of State. While initially wary about American intervention, Clinton was reassured after meeting one of the leaders of the Libyan opposition, Mahmoud Jibril, and by the knowledge that some members of the Arab League would participate in military action.<sup>28</sup>

The internal debate presented Obama with two options: do nothing and allow the British and French act on their own or join the British and French in supporting a no-fly zone. Obama was dissatisfied with these choices; since Qaddafi was relying on ground attacks, a no-fly zone would be, in the President's words, "a show to protect backsides, politically," rather than an effort to stop the killing. Instead, he proposed a third option, getting a UN resolution to authorize military strikes to protect Libyan citizens from ground attacks.<sup>29</sup> The military effort that followed passage of that resolution was quite successful. Libyan civilians were safe, military strikes against government forces had the effect of weakening them to the point that the government was overthrown in August, and Qaddafi was killed in October. Several NATO officials later wrote that this was the "right way to run an intervention," and Gideon Rose, editor of *Foreign Affairs*, characterized it as the "immaculate intervention."<sup>30</sup>

Obama welcomed the changes in Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere in the Middle East. In a major speech in May 2011, he argued that they created a "historic opportunity" for the U.S. to promote its values as well as its interests, that is, "after decades of accepting the world as it is in the region, we have a chance to pursue the world as it should be." In the future, opposition to repression and support for political and economic reform would be a "top priority" for the U.S., one "that must be translated into concrete actions, and supported by all of the diplomatic, economic and strategic tools at our disposal." As for specifics, Obama pledged efforts to work with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to stabilize and modernize the Tunisian and Egyptian economies, to grant some debt relief to Egypt, and to initiate a trade and investment partnership with the countries of the region. While the President was hopeful about the region's future, he acknowledged that "change of this magnitude does not come easily" and that "there will be good days and there will be bad days."<sup>31</sup> Those comments would certainly characterize later events in Egypt and Libya. Neither country took a straight line toward a stable regime, much less a democratic one. In effect, several years after

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<sup>28</sup> Clinton, *op. cit.*, pp. 298–302; Mann, *op. cit.*, pp. 288–291.

<sup>29</sup> D. Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World*, New York 2016, pp. 96–101, Obama quoted at p. 97.

<sup>30</sup> I.H. Daalder, J.G. Stavridis, *NATO's Victory in Libya: The Right Way to Run an Intervention*, "Foreign Affairs" March/April 2012, available online: [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2012-02-02/natos-victory-libya](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2012-02-02/natos-victory-libya) (15.05.2017); Rose quoted in: Chollet, *op. cit.*, pp. 100–101.

<sup>31</sup> White House, *Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa*, Washington D.C., 19.05.2011, available online: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa> (21.02.2017).

the revolutions, the two countries looked similar to what had preceded them: a dictatorship in Egypt and a chaotic political situation in Libya.

In Egypt, parliamentary and presidential elections were held in the first half of 2012. The winner of the divisive June presidential election was Muhammed Morsi, the candidate of the Islamic Brotherhood. The Egyptian establishment had long feared the Brotherhood and refused to cooperate with Morsi's regime, while Morsi acted to solidify Islamic principles in a proposed constitution. Political polarization and political violence increased by the summer of 2013, when there were massive demonstrations against the government. In this context, the leader of the Egyptian military, General al-Sisi, launched a coup on July 3, 2013 and soon instituted massive repression against his real and imagined political opponents, repression on a par with that of the ousted dictator Mubarak.<sup>32</sup>

The Obama administration acted less decisively in response to these events than it had to the protests against Mubarak, because they created a dilemma: how to advance both its security interests with a longstanding partner and also promote continuing political and economic reforms. This dilemma became acute with Morsi's election as president. The Muslim Brotherhood he headed was described by some, not Obama, as a terrorist organization, and it had long been critical of both Egypt's peace treaty with Israel and other elements of the regional security structure. Nonetheless, the U.S. tried to work with the government, believing that the Brotherhood's popularity required its inclusion in any government claiming to be democratic, and to combat the prevailing narrative that the U.S. only supported regional democracies that were pro-American. That is, "Obama was prepared to pay the short-run costs of an unsympathetic Egyptian president in order to achieve a long-term consolidation of Egyptian democracy."<sup>33</sup>

As indicated above, however, the Egyptian military was unwilling to pay those costs and began to move against Morsi's presidency, something the U.S. opposed. While, as one official later argued, "there was no denying Morsi made a mess of things, we did not want to see a counter-revolution by force."<sup>34</sup> Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel had numerous phone conversations with Egyptian Defense Minister General al-Sisi, urging him to seek political reconciliation and to keep the army out of politics, and indicating that a move by the military would have an adverse impact on relations with the United States. In the aftermath of the coup and the repression that followed, the U.S. imposed some sanctions against the country, e.g., restricting the sale of some arms and cancelling a planned military exercise. Obama refused to call the military's intervention a coup, however, because doing so would require a cessation of U.S. military assistance. Still, he did

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<sup>32</sup> M. Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*, New York 2016, pp. 139–57; S.A. Cook, *Egypt's Nightmare: Sisi's Dangerous War on Terror*, "Foreign Affairs" November/December 2016, available online: [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/egypt-s-nightmare](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/egypt-s-nightmare) (24.02.2017).

<sup>33</sup> M. Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

<sup>34</sup> Chollet, *op. cit.*, pp. 116–20, quoted at p. 119.

say that the relationship could “not return to business as usual.” The U.S. hoped that sanctions would increase its leverage with the al-Sisi government, but they did not as regional states increased their aid to it. In light of that and the emergence of the Islamic State, relations did effectively return to business as usual within several years: large military aid programs, with Egypt receiving \$1.3 billion annually, and military exercises resumed, and Secretary of State Kerry traveled to Cairo in August 2014 to participate in the first Strategic Dialogue with Egyptian officials since 2009.<sup>35</sup>

In Libya, the situation was even more chaotic. As in Egypt, initial signs were promising. The transitional government that had come to power following Qaddafi’s overthrow agreed to relinquish power in favor of an elected government, and those elections were held in July 2012. From the start, however, that government had little power, a result of both Qaddafi’s hollowing out of state institutions and the continuing presence of armed militias that collectively had more power than the state. Those militias often drew on foreign support, giving them little need or desire to compromise. The situation deteriorated so much that by the summer of 2015, the country effectively had two governments, neither of which could extend its control over the country. A December 2015 UN-sponsored peace agreement sought to create a unified government, but it has stalled in the months since.<sup>36</sup>

The U.S. initially established good relations with the new government. Both Secretary of State Clinton and Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta visited Libya in an effort to show support. The U.S. worked with the government to secure what remained of Qaddafi’s chemical weapons stockpiles and to get control of many surface-to-air missiles that might be a threat to civilian aircraft. Assisting the country’s political and economic development proved to be much more difficult, however, in large part because the Libyans both wanted Western economic assistance and the preservation of their independence. In practice, this meant that negotiations on Libya’s needs took months, followed by difficulties in getting them signed and implemented. Moreover, the Libyans insisted that there would be no foreign peacekeeping forces, preventing any return of American or other troops to the country. Whatever efforts the United States or other Western governments might employ were effectively abandoned after the September 2012 terrorist attack on the American diplomatic facility in Benghazi.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 120–123; M.W. Hanna, *Getting Over Egypt: Time to Rethink Relations*, “Foreign Affairs” November/December 2015, available online [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/egypt/getting-over-egypt](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/egypt/getting-over-egypt) (10.02.2017).

<sup>36</sup> M. Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*, *op. cit.*, pp. 175–188; International Crisis Group, *The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset*, 4.11.2016, available online: [www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/libyan-political-agreement-time-reset](http://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/libyan-political-agreement-time-reset) (10.02.2017).

<sup>37</sup> D. Chollet, B. Fishman, *Who Lost Libya? Obama’s Intervention in Retrospect*, “Foreign Affairs” 20.04.2015, available online [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2015-04-20/who-lost-libya](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2015-04-20/who-lost-libya) (10.02.2017); D. Chollet, *The Long Game*, *op. cit.*, pp 110–114; for events in Benghazi,

*Syria and Debates About the Use of American Military Power* Syria is a third country affected by the Arab Spring, but events there raised very different questions. At the outset, events in Syria mirrored those in Libya: in both, citizens began large protests against a longstanding autocrat, Bashar al-Assad in Syria, in both, the regime's military fired on protestors, and in both there were fears of a humanitarian catastrophe. Yet from the start, Obama ruled out military intervention to protect Syrian civilians. As the war progressed and numerous foreign actors intervened, a humanitarian tragedy developed: there were more than 4.5 million refugees and six million internally displaced persons by the end of 2016.<sup>38</sup> The continuing humanitarian tragedy and seeming inability to end the war led to a second opportunity for U.S. military intervention to protect civilians. Two options were proposed: safe havens and no-fly zones. While the humanitarian rationale for safe havens is clear, the military was strongly opposed. The Bosnian case demonstrated that the mere establishment of safe havens does not protect the people in them, so ways would have to be devised to protect the safe havens. This would probably require the creation of a no-fly zone, but doing so would be far more difficult in Syria than it had been in Libya. Syrian air defense capabilities were far superior to Libya's, and efforts to destroy them would undoubtedly result in civilian casualties. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Martin Dempsey, argued in July 2013 that establishing a no-fly zone would require the deployment of "thousands" of American forces, create risks such as "the loss of U.S. aircraft, which would require us to insert personnel recovery forces," and might not even have much of an impact because the Syrian government relied largely on land-based weapons. Arguments such as these made it easy for Obama to reject the idea.<sup>39</sup> In doing so, he was adhering to another American tradition, i.e., not acting in cases of mass atrocities, whether in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bangladesh, or elsewhere.<sup>40</sup>

There was a third, very different, occasion when Obama might have used American military power in Syria. This concerned the existence and possible use of the country's chemical weapons. There were initial hints in the summer of 2012

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see: D. Kirkpatrick, *A Deadly Mix in Benghazi*, "New York Times" 28.12.2013, available online: [www.nytimes.com/projects/2013/benghazi/#/?chapt=0](http://www.nytimes.com/projects/2013/benghazi/#/?chapt=0) (27.02.2017).

<sup>38</sup> European Commission, *ECHO Factsheet: Syria Crisis*, January 2017, available online: [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/syria\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/syria_en.pdf) (14.02.2017).

<sup>39</sup> M. Kaldor, *A Humanitarian Strategy Focused on Syrian Civilians*, [in:] *The Syria Dilemma*, N. Hashemi, D. Postel (eds), Boston 2013, pp. 147–59; Dempsey quoted in: G. Lubold, *Breaking: Every Military Option in Syria Sucks*, "Foreign Policy" 23.07.2013, available online: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/07/23/breaking-every-military-option-in-syria-sucks/> (15.10.2014); M. Landler, T. Shanker, *Pentagon Lays Out Options for U.S. Military Effort in Syria*, "New York Times" 22.07.2013, available online: [www.nytimes.com/2013/07/23/world/middleeast/pentagon-outlining-options-to-congress-suggests-syria-campaign-would-be-costly.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/23/world/middleeast/pentagon-outlining-options-to-congress-suggests-syria-campaign-would-be-costly.html?pagewanted=all) (14.10.14, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> See: S. Power, *The Problem from Hell: America in the Age of Genocide*, New York 2013 and G.J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide*, New York 2013.

that it might be planning to do so. The Pentagon developed contingency plans to find and secure the stockpiles, but when these concluded that doing so would require at least 75,000 troops, the focus shifted to deterring the regime from using the weapons it had. Obama issued a warning to the Syrian government via Russia and Iran, its most important allies. However, he also articulated an off-the-cuff public warning on August 20: “We have been very clear to the Assad regime... that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized.”<sup>41</sup> While the President did not explicitly threaten military action, the “red line” phrase suggested a commitment to do so. He tried to back away from the comment in subsequent months, but after the Syrian regime clearly used chemical weapons in August 2013, Obama made a more explicit threat, saying the U.S. would respond with “military action against Syrian regime targets.” Now there appeared to be even more justification for military action. Not only had the Syrian government committed what many considered to be a crime against humanity, but Obama’s prior statements imposed what many considered to be an obligation to act. Secretary of State Kerry argued for military action, because doing so “is directly related to our credibility and whether countries still believe the United States when it says something,” while Vice President Biden argued that “big nations don’t bluff.” The Pentagon developed plans to strike nearly fifty targets that could be struck with cruise missiles fired from ships in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>42</sup> However, Obama soon began to have second thoughts about military action and turned to diplomacy. Asked if there was anything the Syrian leader could do to prevent military action, Kerry responded by saying, “Sure, he could turn over every bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week,” although he added that Assad “isn’t about to do it...” It is not clear if this was a casual remark, a reflection of conversations Kerry had been having with allies, or a serious diplomatic offer, but Russia quickly acted on it, persuading Syria to adopt the Chemical Weapons Convention and to develop a plan to destroy all of its chemical weapons by June 30, 2014.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Panetta, *op. cit.*, p. 448; Obama quoted in: G. Kessler, *The Fact Checker: President Obama and the “red line” on Syria’s chemical weapons*, “Washington Post” 6.09.2013, available online: [www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/wp/2013/09/06/president-obama-and-the-red-line-on-syrias-chemical-weapons/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/wp/2013/09/06/president-obama-and-the-red-line-on-syrias-chemical-weapons/) (14.10.2014); P. Baker, et al, *Off-the-Cuff Obama Line Put U.S. in Bind on Syria*, “New York Times” 4.03.2013, available online: [www.nytimes.com/2013/05/05/world/middleeast/obamas-vow-on-chemical-weapons-puts-him-in-tough-spot.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/05/world/middleeast/obamas-vow-on-chemical-weapons-puts-him-in-tough-spot.html?pagewanted=all) (15.10.2014).

<sup>42</sup> Kerry and Biden quoted in: J. Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*, “The Atlantic” April 2016, available online: [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/) (27.02.2017); D. Chollet, *The Long Game*, *op. cit.*, pp. 2–4.

<sup>43</sup> Kerry quoted in: Clinton, *op. cit.*, p. 396; C.M. Blanchard, C.E. Humud, M.B.D. Nikitin, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, Congressional Research Service Report, Washington D.C. 2014, available online: <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/219940.pdf> (14.10.2014).

## DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION

An obvious conclusion of this study is that the Obama administration failed to meet many of the goals it had set for itself. It did withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq and was able to facilitate the departure of Mubarak and Qaddafi. Against those outcomes are the adverse consequences following the withdrawal from Iraq and intervention in Libya and an even more repressive regime in Egypt. The civil war and related humanitarian tragedy continue in Syria, contributing to the rise of the Islamic State and its threat to regional security. Peace between Israelis and Palestinians is probably more distant at the end of Obama's term than it was at the beginning. Finally, the administration failed to improve America's image in the Arab Middle East, something Obama had sought to begin to do in his Cairo speech. In fact, regional opinions of the United States were often lower in 2014 and 2015 than they had been at the outset of Obama's presidency in 2009. In Egypt, for instance, the percentage of the population with favorable attitudes about the U.S. declined from 27% in 2009 to 14% in 2014. In Jordan, it had declined from 25% in 2009 to 14% in 2015, while in Lebanon the percentage with favorable attitudes had declined from 55% to 39% in the same period. The only exception to this pattern in the countries surveyed by Pew Global was in the Palestinian territories, where favorable attitudes had increased from 15% to a still low 26% between 2009–2015.<sup>44</sup>

Administration officials acknowledged these failures, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly. The most obvious example is Kerry's frustration with Israel and the failure of the peace process, but there are others. Regarding the withdrawal from Iraq, while some in the administration were satisfied with the outcome, e.g., a "senior level Obama official" argued at the time that "... we came to the conclusion that achieving the goal of a security partnership with Iraq was not dependent on the size of our footprint in country, and that stability in Iraq did not depend on the presence of U.S. forces,"<sup>45</sup> there was much criticism of the process. Secretary of Defense Panetta lamented the fact that the White House was "so eager to rid itself of Iraq that it was willing to withdraw rather than lock in arrangements that would preserve our influence and interests."<sup>46</sup> Two former ambassadors to Iraq were also critical of the process. Ryan Crocker, the ambassador who had helped to negotiate the 2008 SOFA, later argued that, "I don't think either government handled it as well as it could have been handled. The U.S. side came in too late. You have got to have a lot of latitude for difficulties, foreseen and unforeseen. On the Iraqi side, they should have said, 'If you want this, don't try to determine our own procedures,'" i.e., insisting that the SOFA

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<sup>44</sup> Pew Research Centre, *Opinion of the United States*, Pew Global: Global Indicators Database, available online [www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/1/group/6/](http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/1/group/6/) (06.02.2017).

<sup>45</sup> Senior official quoted in: M. R. Gordon and B.E. Trainer, *op. cit.*, quoted at pp. 673–674.

<sup>46</sup> L. Panetta, *op. cit.*, p. 393.



be approved by the Iraqi parliament. Hill, one of Crocker's successors, identified another problem: "There was perhaps more optimism than the facts might have justified," and "from the point of view of listening to [Iraqi] politicians, no one was prepared to say that things were better—and, in fact, many of them felt that things were getting worse" at the time of the final U.S. withdrawal.<sup>47</sup>

Regarding the Arab Spring, Central Intelligence Agency Director, John Brennan, contended near the end of the administration that, "I think there were very unrealistic expectations in Washington, including in some parts of the administration, that the 'Arab Spring' was going to push out these authoritarian regimes and democracy is going to flourish."<sup>48</sup> Of Libya, Obama later admitted that the interveners had "underestimated the need to come in full force." His "biggest lesson" from that episode was to ask the question "[d]o we have an answer for the day after" a tyrant is removed.<sup>49</sup> That question helps explain his caution in Syria, but others in the government were very critical of the unwillingness to use military force. In June 2016, more than fifty mid-level Foreign Service officers filed a "dissent channel" memo to express their disapproval of Obama's unwillingness to use military force there. They argued that "achieving our objectives will continue to elude us if we do not include the use of military force as an option..." and that perpetuation of the status quo "will continue to present increasingly dire, if not disastrous, humanitarian, diplomatic, and terrorism-related challenges."<sup>50</sup>

Yet administration officials would also point to successes. One is the outcome of the problem of Syria's chemical weapons. Chollet points out "without a bomb being dropped, Syria had admitted to having a massive chemical weapons program it had never before acknowledged, agreed to give it up, and submitted to a multinational coalition that removed the weapons and destroyed them in a way that had never been tried before."<sup>51</sup> For Obama, perhaps the greatest success was keeping the United States out of a major war in the region. As he had written as far back as 2007 in *The Audacity of Hope*, a U.S. military incursion into a Muslim country "spurs on insurgencies based on religious sentiment and nationalist pride," "fans anti-American sentiment among Muslims," and "increases the pool of potential terrorist recruits."<sup>52</sup> He had also long questioned the utility of military

<sup>47</sup> Crocker quoted in: Gordon, Trainer, *op. cit.*, pp. 673–674; Hill quoted in: M. Crowley, *op. cit.*

<sup>48</sup> Brennan quoted in: Petra, *CIA chief: Obama miscalculated consequences of Arab Spring*, "Jordan News Agency" 11.01.2017, available online: [www.petra.gov.jo/Public\\_News/Nws\\_NewsDetails.aspx?Site\\_Id=1&lang=2&NewsID=284710&CatID=13&Type=Home&GType=1](http://www.petra.gov.jo/Public_News/Nws_NewsDetails.aspx?Site_Id=1&lang=2&NewsID=284710&CatID=13&Type=Home&GType=1) (24.02.2017).

<sup>49</sup> T.L. Friedman, *Obama on the World*, "New York Times" 8.08.2014, available online: [www.nytimes.com/2014/08/09/opinion/president-obama-thomas-l-friedman-iraq-and-world-affairs.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/09/opinion/president-obama-thomas-l-friedman-iraq-and-world-affairs.html) (02.04.2016).

<sup>50</sup> New York Times, *State Department Draft Dissent Memo on Syria*, "New York Times" 17.06.2016, available online: [www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/17/world/middleeast/document-state-dept-syria.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/17/world/middleeast/document-state-dept-syria.html) (21.08.2016).

<sup>51</sup> D. Chollet, *The Long Game*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>52</sup> B. Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, London 2007, p. 308.

force, a belief reflected in his decision not to attack Syria after its use of chemical weapons: very important was “our assessment that while we could inflict some damage on Assad, we could not, through a missile strike, eliminate the chemical weapons themselves,” with the resulting “prospect of Assad having survived the strike and claiming he had successfully defied the United States, that the United States had acted unlawfully in the absence of a UN mandate, and that would have potentially strengthened his hand rather than weakened it.” He also rejected the credibility argument: “dropping bombs on someone to prove that you’re willing to drop bombs on someone is just about the worst reason to use force.”<sup>53</sup>

With respect to the failures, what explains them? There were a number of factors that were outside of Obama’s control; “regardless of the Obama administration’s transgressions, the Middle East isn’t primarily a mess of the president’s making,” but were “largely the result of a broken, angry, and dysfunctional region in turmoil . . .”<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the region is undergoing a period of unprecedented change: “Not since the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century has the Middle East seen so much chaos.”<sup>55</sup> This is hardly the context for a successful American policy.

Yet even in more peaceful and stable times, history has shown that local realities have often trumped foreign efforts to promote change. Robert Malley, a White House official responsible for the region, has argued that “External powers have long sought to influence the Middle East, for better and (all too often) for worse. But ultimately, local politics and regional dynamics have the final say.” This has been as true for the United States as other foreign powers. Thus, it is a “fallacy,” according to Philip Gordon, Malley’s predecessor, to think that “there is an external, American solution to every problem—even when decades of experience, including recent experience, suggest that this is not the case.” Gordon provided a neat summary of recent U.S. experience to illustrate his point: “In Iraq, the U.S. intervened and occupied and the result was a costly disaster. In Libya, the U.S. intervened and did not occupy, and the result was a costly disaster. In Syria, the U.S. neither intervened nor occupied, and the result was a costly disaster.”<sup>56</sup>

Not only has American influence long been unable to shape regional realities, but its influence has eroded in recent years. The “long period of American primacy in the Middle East is ending. Although the Iraq war damaged Washing-

<sup>53</sup> Obama quoted in: J. Goldberg, *op. cit.*

<sup>54</sup> A.D. Miller, *A Defense of Obama’s Middle East “Balancing Act,”* “Foreign Policy” 15.08.2016, available online: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/15/a-defense-of-obamas-middle-east-balancing-act-syria-russia-iran-nsc/> (15.02.2017).

<sup>55</sup> K. Pollack, *Fight or Flight: America’s Choice in the Middle East*, “Foreign Affairs” March/April 2016, available online: [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2016-02-16/fight-or-flight](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2016-02-16/fight-or-flight) (19.11.2016).

<sup>56</sup> Malley quoted in: A.D. Miller, *A Defense of Obama’s Middle East “Balancing Act,”* *op. cit.*; P. Gordon, *The Middle East is Falling Apart. America isn’t to blame. There’s no easy fix*, “Politico” 4.06.2015, available online: [www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/06/america-not-to-blame-for-middle-east-falling-apart-118611\\_Page3.html#.WKQk2X88dPY](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/06/america-not-to-blame-for-middle-east-falling-apart-118611_Page3.html#.WKQk2X88dPY) (17.02.2017).

ton's credibility and empowered U.S. adversaries, by the time the United States invaded Iraq, the region was already becoming less malleable all on its own."<sup>57</sup> Other factors have emerged since then. Today, America and its regional allies often have different priorities, the U.S. focused mostly on terrorism while many of its regional allies are more interested in confronting Iranian regional ambitions. Traditional pro-American elites such as the uniformed military, secular technocrats, and oil industry leaders have seen their domestic influence erode and/or are less pro-American than they once were, while Islamic forces skeptical about or hostile to the U.S. have increased their influence. The U.S. is less dependent on foreign sources of oil, given the development of fracking, hence Saudi Arabia and the countries of the Gulf are less important to it. America has limited resources to devote to the region, given the consequences of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and its desire to focus more on Asia. Finally, there is the emergence of new regional and global powers—Iran, Turkey, Russia, China—seeking to exert their influence over the region.<sup>58</sup>

Obama was also the victim of bad timing or bad luck. Israel's Netanyahu, a leader less inclined to make peace with the Palestinians than his predecessors, became prime minister in March 2009, barely two months after Obama took office. Previous U.S. leaders had had personal and policy difficulties with the Israeli leader when they tried to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace, and one could predict that Obama would as well. With Obama, however, the situation became much worse. According to Aaron David Miller, a former diplomat who had worked on Middle East issues in both Republican and Democratic administrations, the Obama-Netanyahu relationship was "clearly the most dysfunctional relationship between an American and Israeli leader." While the immediate context for that assessment was Netanyahu's strenuous objections to Obama's proposed nuclear deal with Iran, "a good relationship between the two men never developed. And today, following years of frostiness, awkwardness and downright hostility, it is worse than ever."<sup>59</sup> Another "timing" issue concerned the humanitarian crisis in Syria, where the "odds of effective American action were shaped less by the extent of Syrian suffering, and more by the arbitrariness of timing." American decisions to intervene militarily in response to humanitarian tragedies have followed a cycle since the end of the Cold War: an intervention in response to security and humanitarian concerns occurs, is subsequently defined as a failure and followed by inaction in the next humanitarian crisis, but subsequent later feelings of guilt

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<sup>57</sup> Simon and Stevenson, *op. cit.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*; F.A. Gerges, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–25.

<sup>59</sup> A. D. Miller, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Netanyahu*, "Foreign Policy" 30.05.2012. available online: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/05/30/the-curious-case-of-benjamin-netanyahu/> (27.02.2017); Miller quoted in: T. McCoy, *The Roots of Why Obama and Netanyahu Dislike Each Other So Much*, "Washington Post" 26.02.2015, available online: [www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/02/26/the-roots-of-why-obama-and-netanyahu-dislike-each-other-so-much/?utm\\_term=.966b9700458b](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/02/26/the-roots-of-why-obama-and-netanyahu-dislike-each-other-so-much/?utm_term=.966b9700458b) (12.02.2017).

about American inaction leads to pressure to act in the next such case. The problem for Obama and, much more so Syrians, was that “By chance, the [Syrian] conflict occurred in 2011: a moment when the odds of Washington coming to the rescue were at the lowest point in a generation,” a result of the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>60</sup>

Domestic American public opinion and politics also served as a constraint. Two prominent observers have argued that “the thrust of US policy in the [Middle East] derives almost entirely from domestic politics.”<sup>61</sup> While they were writing in the context of U.S.-Israeli relations, the Obama years also illustrate how that point could be extended to other regional policy issues. With regard to Israel, it has strong support in the Congress and remains the leading recipient of American foreign aid. Thus, despite the difficulties in U.S.-Israeli relations in the Obama years and the difficulties in the Obama-Netanyahu relationship, the President agreed to a ten-year \$38 billion military aid program to the Jewish state.<sup>62</sup> Another persistent problem for Presidents is the public and congressional pressure to “do something” in the face of overseas atrocities followed by their reluctance to authorize the use of military force to deal with them. In Syria, for instance, the Senate had unanimously passed a resolution in early March 2011 calling for American support for UN efforts to create a no-fly zone to protect Syrian civilians, but when Obama was considering targeted strikes against Syrian chemical weapons—a much briefer and more modest military mission—it was clear that he would not even get majority support in the Congress.<sup>63</sup> Obama was also hindered by extreme partisanship throughout his presidency. This was most evident in the response to the tragedy in Benghazi, where Ambassador Christopher Stevens and several colleagues were killed during an attack on an American diplomatic facility. No fewer than seven congressional committees investigated this incident, intended as much to embarrass the administration as to investigate the tragedy. One administration insider later complained about the “shameless and cynical way that Obama and [Secretary of State] Clinton’s critics used the Benghazi attacks to score political points with their rank and file.”<sup>64</sup>

These comments are not intended to apologize for Obama’s policy failures, but rather to contextualize them. There were certainly a number of problems with the administration’s approach to the issues considered here. The most fundamental

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<sup>60</sup> D. Tierney, *Syria and the Cycle of American Intervention*, “The Atlantic” 24.10.2016, available online: [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/10/syria-washington-obama-iraq-middle-east-intervention-assad-isis/505202/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/10/syria-washington-obama-iraq-middle-east-intervention-assad-isis/505202/) (27.02.2017).

<sup>61</sup> J. Mearsheimer, S. Walt, *The Israeli Lobby*, “London Review of Books” 23.03.2006, available online: [www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n06/john-mearsheimer/the-israel-lobby](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n06/john-mearsheimer/the-israel-lobby) (02.05.2015).

<sup>62</sup> T. Rubin, *Worldview: The Reality Behind the U.N. Vote*, “Philadelphia Inquirer” 30.12.2016, availability online: [www.philly.com/philly/columnists/trudy\\_rubin/20161230\\_Trudy\\_Rubin\\_The\\_reality\\_behind\\_the\\_U\\_N\\_vote.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/columnists/trudy_rubin/20161230_Trudy_Rubin_The_reality_behind_the_U_N_vote.html) (24.02.2017).

<sup>63</sup> Chollet, *The Long Game*, *op. cit.*, pp. 14–15, 97.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 113.

one was often the failure to develop a clear and consistent strategy. Consider the Arab Spring: the administration supported regime change in some of its allies, e.g., Egypt, but not others such as Bahrain. It supported regime change in countries ruled by adversaries, not a surprise, but employed different means to bring about that outcome. Similarly regarding the use of military power, it did support military action to overthrow Libya's Qaddafi but not Syria's Assad, it did support troop withdrawal from Iraq only to later send troops back to the country, it did use military force in Libya to protect civilians against Qaddafi but not to protect them from the numerous militias that developed after his overthrow. In effect, each issue was judged on its own merits, an approach Obama acknowledged and defended. He opposed a "cookie-cutter" approach to the region's problems, because events and responses are so "case dependent."<sup>65</sup> This general point is true to a certain extent, but it can be taken too far. An "it depends" approach to regional problems requires extensive discussion and debate regarding major issues, allowing events on the ground to progress. Moreover, it does not provide a good basis for the articulation of policy to the American public or to America's foreign friends and foes.

Another problem was what some in the White House referred to as the "Cairo trap," i.e., the need "to avoid...raising hopes for a new beginning but with little tangible follow-through."<sup>66</sup> The speech in Cairo is a good place to start: Obama talked about a new beginning between the U.S. and the Islamic world, how the U.S. would return to the ideals it had abandoned after 9/11, and how it would avoid military solutions to regional problems. Comments such as these raised regional hopes that, as the polling data above indicate, were followed by disappointment. A second example of great rhetoric followed by limited action is Obama's May 2011 speech about the Arab Spring. He spoke about developing policies that combined America's interests and its values, that promised to support individual self-determination as much as political stability, and to do so not only where change had occurred but also where it had not. Again, there was not a lot of follow-up on those promises.<sup>67</sup> The "red line" comment about Syrian use of chemical weapons provides another example.

Another problem for the administration was the failure to link means with ends. This is clear with regard to statements about Israeli settlements and a Syrian "red line." What was the connection, for example, between halting settlement construction and peace? Yes, doing so would improve prospects for Palestinian participation in talks and preserve territory for any future Palestinian state, but what were the connections between the means of a halt to settlement building

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<sup>65</sup> Obama quoted in: *Ibidem*, p. xi.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 94.

<sup>67</sup> A. Hawthorne, M. Dunn, *Remember that historic Arab Spring speech?*, "Foreign Policy" 21.05.2013, available online: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/05/21/remember-that-historic-arab-spring-speech/> (27.02.2017).

and the end of peace? Threats about Syrian government use of chemical weapons reveal the opposite problem, the failure to link that end with the means to achieve it. That is, while the administration hoped the threat would deter chemical weapons use, there was little planning of any military response to enforce it, at least until the very last minute. Another example comes from counter-terrorism policy, an issue not considered in-depth here. How would the essentially military effort versus the Islamic State eliminate the terrorist threat and promote regional stability, when most argue that the causes of the Islamic State were more political, i.e., bad governance, than military?

Discussion of settlements and the red line illustrate another problem, the failure to prepare fallback positions. For instance, what would the administration do if Israel refused its demands regarding settlements? What would it do if Assad was not deterred and actually used chemical weapons? Regarding the removal of autocrats in Syria and Libya, what would it do if Assad did not leave office or the initial military intervention in Libya proved unsuccessful or inadequate? What would it do if the Egyptian military, despite U.S. prodding, did act to overthrow Morsi's government? These outcomes were imaginable and, perhaps, predictable, but the slow American response to them and failure to articulate alternate approaches hindered its ability to respond quickly to changing realities.

In conclusion, this article has illustrated how the pattern of President Obama's policies in the Middle East were similar to those of his predecessors, discussed the failures and frustrations of the Obama administration in the region, and sought to explain those failures. Does Obama's experience shed any light on what might be the experiences of the new Trump administration? If recent and more distant history is any guide, one can predict that it will try to reduce the American role in the Middle East but will be unable to do so in light of regional events and that its influence over those events will erode. Although Trump said relatively little about foreign policy in general or the Middle East in particular during the campaign or the early months of his presidency, it seems clear that he wants to reduce America's global role. With respect to the Middle East, his strong pro-Israel position and willingness to agree with any political solution Israelis and Palestinians might agree to suggests a much more limited American role in the peace process. He has placed great emphasis on Islamic extremism and Islamic terrorism, resulting in less attention to most other regional issues. His tendency to view overseas partners largely in terms of what they can contribute to American efforts might lead him to devalue some traditional partners. History suggests, however, that there will likely be regional events that will draw greater American attention. Predicting the unexpected is always a risky enterprise, but any or all of the following are imaginable and might heighten the American role in the region: a major terrorist attack in the U.S.; serious Islamist threats to pro-American governments in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, or Egypt; or instability in Syria spilling over to Israel.

On the other hand, the domestic American factors that frustrated Obama will not be as prominent in the next several years. Trump's strong support for Israel

will largely remove that issue from domestic controversies and, while partisanship will likely not be reduced, Republican control of both houses of Congress will reduce its impact on policymaking. The “do something” public demands that accompany the emergence of humanitarian crises are predictable, but previous Presidents have shown a willingness to ignore them in most circumstances and not have it affect their approval ratings.

Finally, some of Obama’s difficulties resulted from the policy process used to deal with them. While it is too early to comment definitely on the policy process in the Trump White House, early indications are that it will be less orderly than Obama’s.

This all suggests that Trump, like Obama, will continue to deal with some of the enduring problems in the region, will likely be confronted with new ones that demand American attention, and that it will be unable to deal effectively with them.

**Tytuł:** Polityka B. Obamy wobec Bliskiego Wschodu

**Streszczenie:** W artykule dokonano analizy polityk administracji prezydenta B. Obamy wobec Bliskiego Wschodu. Od samego początku ich priorytetem była redukcja roli USA w regionie oraz promowanie pokoju między Izraelczykami a Palestyńczykami. Arabska Wiosna przyczyniła się do powstania wielu nowych, wcześniej nie występujących wyzwań, z którymi musiała się zmierzyć administracja. Prezydent Obama nie osiągnął większości swoich celów, a wyjaśnienie kontekstu i przyczyn tych niepowodzeń zawarto w podsumowaniu artykułu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Barack Obama, Bliski Wschód, Arabska Wiosna, pokój na Bliskim Wschodzie

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