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The Obama-Romney Foreign Policy Debate: Continuity in Policy

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President Barack Obama and Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney met on stage on Monday night, October 22, 2012, night for their foreign policy debate. The headline was clear: continuity and consensus on the fundamentals of US policy. Neither candidate charted a grand new course for US policy. Neither declared he would attack Iranian nuclear sites or push for peace on the Palestinian track. Rather, both appealed to the consensus in US public opinion that has led to a reluctance to use force and to a slow disengagement from the Middle East. And come January 2013, Israel will have a friend in the White House, one who is willing to “stand with” America’s “greatest ally in the region.”

Still, to the extent the debate reflects the candidates’ actual visions, this is a different United States from the Clinton or George W. Bush eras: this United States will continue to give Israel strong diplomatic and financial support, and will even enhance military and intelligence cooperation. On issues of war and peace, though, the vision may be for Israel to sort out its travails on its own, with the United States “standing with” it.

The Clinton and Bush eras saw a different United States, one that for better or worse pressed forward in the peace process and was less reluctant to use US troops to shape the Middle East. This United States remained active in the early years of Obama’s term, famously clashing with Prime Minister Netanyahu on the peace process. However, the mounting US national debt, a war-weary American public, and the Arab Spring have brought changes in tack. The United States did use force in Libya, but during the debate neither candidate recommended it for Syria. The two agreed on the need to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, and they discussed the Iraq War and its ramifications only in passing. The Palestinian issue – once a mainstay in US foreign policy discussion – came up only in passing, mentioned once by Romney and not at all by Obama.

On Iran, both sounded a cautious note. Both supported sanctions, with Romney arguing that they should have come earlier and been stronger. This demonstrates that there is strong support in the United States for sanctions on Iran – perhaps an obvious point, but

one with overlooked importance. Neither candidate renounced a military option, each calling it “the last resort.” Neither seemed enthusiastic for moderator Bob Schieffer’s proposal of a common defense pact with Israel (though Israel itself has not asked for such a pact). The most significant policy difference, as in the past, was over the point by which Iran must be stopped. Romney repeated that Iran must not “develop nuclear capability,” again opposing Iran reaching a point at which it could break out toward a bomb. Obama said that US policymakers would have timely enough information should Iran move to break out, hinting at the reasoning for his opposing an Iranian nuclear “weapon” (and not “capability”). This is, indeed, a significant distinction in policy, but without a clear sense of consequences for Iran, it risks being a distinction without a difference.

In that sense, Obama and Romney, on Iran as on other issues, appealed to undecided centrist voters in a tired, war-weary nation. That said, if the substantive differences were not great, the two tried to distinguish themselves on style. Romney has criticized Obama for projecting weakness, last night repeating his charge that Obama had embarked on an “apology tour” of the Middle East. Romney also reiterated his calls for increases in the defense budget, including buffing up the US navy. Obama rejected the “apology tour” charge, calling it “probably the biggest whopper” of the campaign. He also chided Romney for lacking knowledge of the military’s real needs, likening the building of more ships to supplying more horses and bayonets made useless by technological advance. Romney tried to draw distinctions between strength and weakness; Obama tried to distinguish between thoughtfulness and impulsiveness. The voters will decide.

The United States seems to have lost its energy and vigor for the Middle East and to have lost its sense of imagination abroad. The best the candidates could muster was Romney’s pledge – again with implicit agreement from Obama – to help Arab societies implement democracy and free markets through aid and programs to implement rule of law. The democracy promotion goal was a tenet of administrations from Kennedy to Bush, while the strategy is that of the European Union. For that matter, Europe was hardly mentioned at the debate, and other important regions, including Russia, India, Africa, and Latin America, garnered only passing references.

As for the Israeli angle, the United States will stand by Israel. The core US-Israel relationship has not been a casualty of the changing mood. Both candidates proudly touted their allegiance to the “greatest ally in the region,” proving the relationship’s durability. The relationship has survived the decade of wars, survived the delegitimization campaigns, survived the anxiety about the US national debt, and survived the Arab Spring. Neither candidate wants his reluctance on Iran to come across as an expression of distancing from Israel. Both felt it important to stress that they want

to manage the US-Israel relationship and that they want the relationship to continue to succeed.

Nonetheless, the debate contains a warning for Israeli policymakers. The results of the presidential election in the United States and the upcoming elections in Israel are of course of great significance. A like-minded Israeli government and US administration may find it easier to cooperate on issues ranging from the peace process to the Iranian issue to the regional ramifications of the Arab Spring. That does not, however, exclude the possibility of cooperation and coordination between a center-right government in Israel and a second-term Obama administration. However, that would require a recalibration of foreign policy priorities and ways and means of attaining objectives. More than that, it would require rebuilding confidence and trust at the highest levels in the two countries' leaderships.

Whichever candidate wins, the public mood in the United States reflects a formidable obstacle to intervention. Whether in Syria or Iran or elsewhere, either man likely will feel political pressure to hold back on using force. The presumption, it seems, is that the United States will not use force unless those proposing it meet a heightened burden of proof. An Israeli government arguing for military involvement could still win the argument, but it must address the American public's concerns. Indeed, in the coming years, this may be a key to managing the broader US-Israel relationship.

