

# The Obama administration and the Middle East: the final two years

By Yossi Alpher

## ■ Executive summary

In dealing with the Middle East, in its final two years the Obama administration will focus on two primary challenges: firstly, prevent Iran from producing a nuclear weapon while avoiding the need for military aggression to achieve that aim and, secondly, “prevent another 9/11”, meaning invoke the minimal military intervention necessary to degrade terrorist capabilities that could target the U.S.

If a solid deal can be struck (and maintained) with Iran, the country could become a key building block of regional stability to counter the region-wide weakness of the Arab states.

The objective of “preventing another 9/11” underlies the U.S.-led coalition’s armed intervention against the Islamic State (IS) in 2014. The campaign against IS can be expected to concentrate on regime preservation in Iraq rather than regime change in Syria. The original plan to “degrade and destroy” IS will become less ambitious.

Regarding Israel and the Palestinians, the president will probably suffice with presenting a set of non-negotiable Clinton-type parameters or principles designed to keep the two-state solution alive for the next administration to tackle.

To the extent a U.S.-Iran deal facilitates greater Iranian penetration of the Levant, Washington is likely to encounter heavy protests and demands for “balancing” gestures from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon and particularly Israel.

## Background

How will the administration of President Barack Obama deal with the Middle East in its final two years in office? This was the topic of recent extensive interviews with a wide range of political observers, primarily in and around Washington, i.e. academics and senior think-tank researchers, former senior government officials, journalists, lobbyists for Middle East countries and causes, etc., all of whom preferred to speak off the record, hence the non-attribution of most quotes in the discussion that follows. The interviews produced a broad degree of consensus in projecting what might be called, paradoxically, a minimalist agenda with far-reaching global ramifications.

Our assessment of the coming two years of the administration’s activity in the Middle East region takes as its point of departure Obama’s emerging “lame-duck” status vis-à-vis a Republican-controlled Congress following the November 2014 elections. The inevitable corollary is that during 2015-16 the Obama team will be drawn to an increased extent to concentrate on foreign affairs – not necessarily in the Middle East – where it can operate relatively unfettered.

Here it bears recalling that, on taking office, Obama inherited a major U.S. and global financial crisis that served to underline what was already a largely domestic U.S. presidential agenda that focused on issues like health care and debt reduction. But the Obama presidency that

began in early 2009 also inherited U.S. occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as a nuclear crisis with Iran, and acted resolutely to end them. Beginning in 2011, it encountered a virtual tsunami of change in the Middle East region: a wave of Arab revolutions that bespoke the collapse of the 100 year-old post-Ottoman state system, a plague of dysfunctional Arab states and unprecedented refugee waves. It largely kept its distance, avoiding intervention on the ground in Syria, Libya, Yemen and Egypt. It did intervene from the air, although always within the framework of coalitions, on behalf of the revolution in Libya and most recently against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. But it has avoided “boots on the ground”.

The administration launched a relatively minor Israeli-Palestinian peace process in 2009-10 and a more extended effort in 2013-14, but without committing major resources or presidential prestige; in this endeavour the administration's failure was no greater than that of its predecessors. In maintaining Israel's security capabilities (including the neutralisation of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal), the administration actually exceeded its predecessors' efforts. By late 2014 it was fair to conclude that a leader who had sought to effect a new departure in relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds with spirited presidential speeches in Ankara and Cairo back in 2009 had little to show for his efforts.

Perhaps most significantly, Obama responded to the Iranian nuclear programme with a far-reaching agenda of international sanctions, leading up to negotiations (again by an international coalition, the P5+1) aimed at reaching an arrangement to freeze or end that programme. These talks are currently planned to extend well into 2015. Needless to say, the administration's concerted effort to develop domestic energy resources also had a significant Middle East angle: reducing dependence on the region's resources.

By the by, most sources queried tended to describe the administration's Middle East policymaking process as the realm of the president himself and a few trusted aides, reflecting sensitivity to U.S. public opinion, but largely circumventing the State Department and Pentagon bureaucracies. In this sense, the resignation in late November 2014 of Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel will have little effect on policymaking regarding the Middle East. Most sources seemed to agree that U.S. security commitments to Israel and the Sunni Arab countries have lately encountered a loss of faith on the part of regional players due to what these players see as a series of misconceived U.S. policy decisions over the past two or three years: abandoning Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak to his fate; non-intervention against the mass murder of civilians by the Syrian regime; failure to create a viable Iraqi military; failure to advance the 2013-14 Israeli-Palestinian peace process; and the mishandling of attempts to broker a quick end to the 2014 Gaza war. Clearly there is a measure of subjectivity in these characterisations, but they appear

worthy of note insofar as they are mentioned by many of the Washington foreign policy “insiders” interviewed.

Also worthy of mention is the unpredictable, which in the Middle East is often the norm. Accordingly, what follows is the picture of the next two years as it emerged in extensive discussions and inquiries that took place primarily in Washington in late October and that factored in the ensuing November election results. Obviously, this picture could change.

### Three key issue areas

By late 2014 – the beginning of Obama's final two years in office – the administration's principal Middle East agenda appeared to boil down to three issue areas: firstly, prevent Iran from producing a nuclear weapon while avoiding the need for military aggression against Iran to achieve that aim; secondly, “prevent another 9/11”, meaning invoke the minimal military intervention necessary – currently in Iraq and Syria and to a minor degree in Yemen – to degrade terrorist capabilities that could target the U.S.; and, thirdly – an area where the geostrategic emphasis is in North America rather than the Middle East – lower oil prices and reduce U.S. dependency on Middle East energy resources.

As for the rest of the Middle East and its problems, demands and conflicts, one former senior official described President Obama's characterisation of the countries of the region as a “bunch of bandits”, each with its petty agenda and “price”, all to be kept in check at a minimal level of investment and/or avoided to the greatest extent possible. Overall, Washington would strive to “lead by consensus”, multilaterally, never alone, putting forth good ideas, but little independent leadership. This would reflect the reality of a lame-duck president and the contraction of the actual U.S. physical presence in the Arab world due to real dangers on the ground in countries like Libya and Yemen, yet, in contrast, the fact that the region still looks to Washington for leadership.

A nuclear deal with Iran is described by Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes as “probably the biggest thing President Obama will do in his second term on foreign policy”. In a best-case scenario, if a solid deal could be struck (and maintained) with Iran, Tehran could be the exception to the “bandits” characterisation. Iran could become (in the characterisation of a senior observer) the “go-to party that can stabilise the region”, the key building bloc of regional stability to counter the region-wide weakness of the Arab states. Uneasy foes of Iran like Israel and Saudi Arabia, their “blowback” contained by U.S. reliance on international consensus, will “have to adjust”. Israel, in particular, is likely to be relegated in U.S. eyes to the shadows of the regional scene due to its preoccupation with the Palestinian issue, its status as no more than a passive ally in the fight against the Islamic State (IS), and ongoing tensions between Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Yet in looking at the two primary regional issue areas – Iran and IS – Washington will not be able to completely ignore the tension inherent in an attempt to cultivate Tehran (which will increasingly become the hegemonic power in Iraq, Syria and much of Lebanon) while still working with willing Sunni Arab partners like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and here and there with Israel (e.g. with Israel and Jordan against Jabhat al-Nusra in south-west Syria) against a variety of Islamist extremists. How, if at all, will the U.S. manage possible early indications of a reactive Saudi nuclear programme (“self-compensation” for international validation of an Iranian programme)? How will it manage escalation in Sunni Arab conflicts with Iran or its proxies in Yemen, Lebanon and Bahrain (in addition to Iraq and Syria), while maintaining its aversion to involvement in Middle East conflicts that do not threaten the U.S. homeland?

To the extent that a U.S.-Iran deal, however partial or slowly executed, coupled with U.S. success in restoring Iraq’s territorial integrity, facilitates greater Iranian penetration of the Levant, Washington is likely to encounter heavy protests and demands for “balancing” gestures from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon and particularly Israel.

Still, even partial success with the triple challenge of Iran, intercepting Islamist terrorism and reducing dependence on Middle East oil will fulfil administration goals for 2015-16. Many in the region will interpret this achievement (along with the open sore of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; see below) as “kicking the can down the road” for the next administration. Yet for Washington it will mean more strategic U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East in favour of managing Ukraine-related tensions with Russia along with a further “pivot to Asia”.

The objective of “preventing another 9/11” explains the U.S.-led coalition’s armed intervention against IS in 2014, in contrast to Washington’s refusal to intervene by force earlier against the mass killings by the Syrian regime: IS has to be opposed because it deliberately kills Americans and could target the U.S., whereas the Assad regime, however vicious toward fellow Syrians, does not. The intervention against IS can be expected to concentrate on regime preservation in Iraq rather than regime change in Syria. The original objective to “degrade and destroy” IS will evolve into a less ambitious “destroy the threat”. And Washington’s efforts will focus primarily on Iraq rather than Syria due to the “china closet” rule: the U.S. “broke” Iraq, whereas in Syria it will seek to limit its obligation to stabilising a de facto partition.

How to hold a dysfunctional Iraq together without the “mission creep” of boots on the ground and body bags that Obama seeks at all cost to avoid – and in the face of repeated hints to the contrary by his generals – will be one principal challenge. Another will be rationalising broad U.S. support for the Kurdish drive to achieve greater autonomy without unnecessarily antagonising Turkey, Iraq and Iran. One way out suggested by several knowledgeable

observers would be to declare “mission accomplished” following a strategic U.S.-led achievement on the ground in Iraq such as the reconquest of Mosul by a reconstituted Iraqi force with Kurdish support.

### The Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Concentrating on Iran, IS and (at the non-confrontational, economic level) energy independence does not mean a total lack of U.S. initiatives elsewhere in the Middle East in the coming two years. But without the active engagement of President Obama and his closest circle of advisers, and barring unforeseen developments, these are more likely to be relative side shows. Thus, Secretary of State John Kerry may try his luck again with the Israelis and Palestinians, if only because, unlike the president, concerning a two-state solution Kerry is “like a dog with a bone with this thing” and is “totally into the great game”.

The only serious presidential backing Kerry is likely to get (probably in Obama’s last year in office) is the presentation directly by the president of a set of non-negotiable Clinton-type parameters or principles that are designed to keep the two-state solution alive for the next administration to tackle rather than to launch yet another risky round of negotiations. These principles will draw on the lessons gleaned from Kerry’s failed nine-month mediating effort in 2013-14, which is deemed by his associates to have been a well-managed initiative that provided all the raw material for formulating the outline of a solution that the administration needs. If this happens, it will be Obama’s “parting gesture” to the Israel-Arab conflict and his ultimate statement of criticism – primarily directed at Israel – regarding the failure to move toward a two-state solution.

Meanwhile, the administration will have to deal with potential Palestinian initiatives to obtain a United Nations Security Council statehood resolution – either by vetoing a Palestinian proposal or by advancing a compromise proposal that Israel will be asked to live with. Jerusalem, incidentally, will continue to be seen as bearing the primary blame for Kerry’s failure. The now famous “chicken-shit” remark reflected a rare expression of the administration’s genuine personal contempt for Prime Minister Netanyahu’s leadership in the Palestinian context. Still, the administration’s hard commitment to Israel’s security will not falter. Instead, Washington will do little to conceal its anger at Netanyahu over the settlements and Iran issues, and will likely display a continued readiness to stand aside as Israel is increasingly isolated in the Western world.

These positions could well be tested in the likely event of a new Israel-Hamas war – particularly should that war spread to Israel’s northern border with Lebanon and Hizbullah and should Israel, virtually inundated with rocket barrages from two directions, argue that effectively it is actually facing either Iran or IS or both across its border with Syria.

## Egypt, Turkey, Libya, Yemen

If the Israeli-Palestinian peace process – or the lack thereof – is likely to be relegated by the administration to relatively non-urgent status in the coming two years, Washington's relations with a number of additional Middle East countries might be even further de-emphasised.

One of these countries is Egypt, which, following revolutions, counter-revolutions and a series of problematic elections, is seen as a failed state. Even the Egyptian army is not, according to one former senior official, deemed worthy of inclusion in the anti-IS coalition in Iraq and Syria. "The bloom is off the rose" of U.S.-Egyptian relations, another commentator noted. An alternative assessment holds that, due to the "security imperative" of Egyptian-Israeli cooperation in Sinai and Gaza and threats from a destabilised Libya (meaning developments connected to the primary objective of preventing Islamist attacks on the U.S.), relations could indeed improve – but only marginally.

Another potential object of relative neglect is Turkey, a highly problematic partner in the anti-IS effort. U.S. displeasure with Ankara's refusal to cooperate fully in the struggle against IS, coloured by President Erdogan's Islamist regional sympathies, will only be balanced by Turkey's NATO credentials and key geostrategic location. One expert characterised Erdogan's plight – and consequently that of Washington in dealing with him – as being the "prisoner of too many constraints" imposed by Kurds, Islamists, the West, etc. The U.S. and Turkey will continue to disagree over Syria even if the Turks relent and offer the U.S. limited access to Incirlik airbase for its anti-IS operation. In the words of one veteran observer, "it used to be that Erdogan was afraid of only one person: Obama. But Obama's inability to use this to his advantage has blunted this influence."

Libya, the focus of armed intervention by a U.S.-led alliance in recent years, seems to have been relegated to "failed-state" status; barring some sort of radical regional flare-up emanating from its territory, it will be left to its neighbours and Europe to deal with.

Yemen, for its part, is already the focus of U.S. drone strikes against al-Qaeda terrorists. Most recently it has witnessed a complex web of conflicts involving the regime, al-Qaeda, a rising Iran-allied Zaidi movement known as the Houthis, and southern secessionists. The Iran factor is of particular concern to the neighbouring Saudis. Yemen could yet force itself upon Washington's attentions within the framework of regional attitudes toward Iran – particularly Saudi-Iranian tensions and Israeli and Egyptian concerns over the integrity of the Bab al-Mandeb Straits – that might prove impossible to disassociate from U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations.

## Effects of the 2016 presidential election

Two potential leading candidacies, one Democrat and one Republican, could pose rather unique problems for Obama's relationship with Israel and for U.S. involvement in combat-

ting IS in the administration's final two years, particularly during the 2016 election year. Hillary Clinton, the Democratic frontrunner, cultivates a warmer image toward Israel than does Obama. Since she will need the pro-Israel Jewish and evangelical vote, she will either have to take her distance from Obama on Israel-related issues, thereby further isolating the president within his own party, or persuade him to make friendly gestures toward Jerusalem.

In parallel, if Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky, with his isolationist credo, becomes the Republican nominee – many of those interviewed believe he has a strong chance – then his anti-foreign aid and anti-foreign entanglement views could become a major campaign issue with regard to U.S. foreign policy. In the Middle East, a Paul candidacy could have potential ramifications for Israel, Egypt, Jordan (three major recipients of U.S. aid) and the anti-IS campaign.

Such a candidacy and campaign would presumably facilitate a closing of the gaps between Obama and Clinton on Middle East issues like Israel-Palestine. Indeed, it could even push a major pro-Republican and pro-Likud financial contributor like gambling mogul Sheldon Adelson into the Clinton camp, thereby obliging Adelson's close associate, Netanyahu, to make the kind of gestures required (reining in settlement spread? welcoming a new Kerry peace initiative?) to reinstate himself in the good graces of the Democratic Party.

Finally, as the 2016 campaign heats up and administration-Congress frictions increase over domestic issues, and assuming a P5+1 deal with Iran remains a realistic proposition, the administration's efforts to insulate the agreement and the concomitant relaxation of economic sanctions from congressional scrutiny and control could eventually run out of constitutional steam, thereby conceivably jeopardising this achievement. This could thrust presumed Israeli and Saudi opposition to the Iran deal back into the spotlight and award Israel additional influence over the November 2016 U.S. elections.

## Conclusion

In its final two years the Obama administration is likely to remain highly focused on reaching and implementing a nuclear deal with Iran and eliminating – or at least radically degrading – IS's capacity to project an international terrorist threat. Most other Middle East actors ("bandits" in Obama's characterisation) will mandate only secondary attention: Turkey's policies toward Islamist movements will be a nuisance, the Israeli-Palestinian two-state process will probably not rate another major effort, U.S.-Egypt relations will be downgraded, but Yemen could demand reluctant U.S. attention.

All these projections are, of course, subject to change in accordance with unanticipated radical developments in the Middle East, along with the vagaries of the 2016 presidential election campaign.

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