

# Romney's Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Written by Aaron Walter

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AARON WALTER, APR 3 2012

Under a Romney Administration, only minor changes would occur within the foreign policy of the United States; in reality, the difference would be largely semantic. His statements and campaign policy positions indicate that Romney would be a conservative and hawkish president. But a Romney Administration would not only continue the current policy initiatives of the Obama Administration, but those of the George W. Bush presidency, too. On topics ranging from Iran's nuclear program to American involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there would not be any significant change.

### Romney's view of the Middle East

During the 2008 Republican presidential primaries, the Middle East was discussed in both debates between candidates. These primaries took place while the surge strategy in Iraq was being implemented, which Romney supported. This put him squarely behind the policy of then-President George W. Bush. He also spoke against setting a timetable for U.S. troop withdrawal, in the belief that such statements gave Iraqi insurgents the knowledge of when to increase attacks in efforts to sow sectarian conflict. Romney also voiced concerns that Iraq's neighbors would take advantage of this weak country to try to influence its domestic and foreign affairs. Romney argued that

"dividing Iraq up into parts and later walking away would present grave risks to the United States and the world. Iran could seize the Shiite south, al Qaeda could dominate the Sunni west, and Kurdish nationalism could destabilize the border with Turkey. A regional conflict could ensue, perhaps even requiring the return of U.S. troops under far worse circumstances." [1]

In addition to supporting the surge strategy, Romney was in favor of continued efforts to build democracy within Iraq and was critical of the conciliatory talk by then-presidential candidate Barack Obama towards Syria and Iran in his first year as president. Romney responded bluntly: "Having the president meet with the authoritarian tyrants of the world is remarkably poor judgment." [2] Romney reiterated his opposition to authoritarian regimes, focusing mostly on Iran, during the 2012 campaign.

While Romney does not believe that the US is unable to deal with Iran militarily, he "would not use ground forces for a possible eventual attack on Iran but instead would use 'blockade, bombardment and surgical military strikes' for the purpose." [3] Romney was asked in the New Hampshire Republican debate if he agreed "that the use of tactical nuclear weapons potentially, would be possible if that were the only way to stop Iran from developing a nuclear bomb?" He responded:

"You don't take options off the table, but what you do is stand back and say, 'What's going on here?' You see what's happening in Sudan and Afghanistan, in Iraq and Iran. All over the world, we're seeing the same thing happening, and that is people are testing the United States of America. And we have to make sure they understand that we're not arrogant; we have resolve. And we have the strength to protect our interests and to protect people who love liberty." [4]

Romney also tried to influence world opinion against Iran as early as his 2008 presidential run, by requesting that the United Nations not allow Iran's president to speak at the opening of the 62<sup>nd</sup> session of the United Nations General

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Assembly. Iranian President Ahmadinejad was scheduled to speak; Romney issued a thinly-veiled threat to cut U.S. funding of the U.N. [5] On Iran's nuclear program, Romney stated that it was "unacceptable", and vowed that he would send aircraft-carriers to the region to make clear "that a military option...remains on the table". However, these statements and actions largely echo those of President Obama. [6]

According to a view from his official campaign website, Romney in fact supports a continuity of official U.S. policy towards Iran. He is in favor of economic sanctions, including denying Iran access to international banking, discouraging it from obtaining credit and divesting from companies that support the Iranian regime. Finally, he supports diplomatic isolation, which coincidentally already exists between the U.S. and Iran. Furthermore, in an overt recognition of U.S. support of the so-called 2009 Green Revolution, Romney would support the Iranian opposition by improving the flow of information to the Iranian population about its own government's repressive activities and refusing to stand silent while the Iranian regime ruthlessly terrorizes its own people. However, the aforementioned positions are all policy actions begun by President George W. Bush in 2008 or intensified by the Obama administration in 2010 and 2011.

One could argue, as Molly Worthen suggests, that Mormonism, and its unique brand of evangelizing, will influence Romney's approach if elected.[7] However, while partisan rhetoric may be required for the campaign trail, Worthen argues that, "international experience and instinctive prudence would rein in [Romney's] commitment to any ideological grand strategy." Another impediment to any radical departure from U.S. foreign policy is the fact that Romney faces lingering suspicions by core Republican constituency of how 'tough' he would be as president, including questions on his commitment to Israel.

### Israel: A vital U.S. interest

On the special relationship with Israel, Romney reaffirms that Israel is America's closest ally in the Middle East, and calls Israel's existence as a Jewish state "a vital U.S. national interest" [8], in a calculated effort to gather the financial and electoral support of American Jews. [9] Moreover, while Romney promises in his campaign website to "work intensively with Turkey and Egypt to shore up the now fraying relationships with Israel that have underpinned peace in the Middle East for decades" [10], such language, translated as policy, would mean only the continuation of present U.S. policy. While Romney's rhetoric towards Israel has been in the context of Iran, in 2007 he presented a speech at the Herzliya conference in Israel, calling upon Arab states to stop funding and arming to Hezbollah and Hamas. [11]

With specific regard to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Romney has argued that the Obama administration, "threw Israel under the bus by laying out [Obama's] view of the policies he thought Israel should adopt in the peace process," particularly the president's May 2011 suggestion of a return to the 1967 borders as the basis for negotiations. [12] This is fantastic political rhetoric, but George W. Bush endorsed this idea, too.

Hence, as Michael Cohen wrote:

"In principle, at least, it's very difficult to see how these priorities are in any way different from those underpinning Obama's foreign policy. Notwithstanding Romney's exceptionalist rhetoric and constant complaints that Obama regularly apologizes for America, in broad strokes the two men view the world and American power basically along the same lines. If there are any identifiable differences between the two candidates it is in their political bluster — and this has the potential to be far more consequential than actual policy alternatives." [13]

### More of the Same

Romney's stated foreign policy positions offer broad continuity with those of the Obama administration. For example, his campaign has produced a voluminous white paper on foreign policy. Romney's instinct appears to be to avoid controversy and play safe. [14] But there are some contradictory statements from his 2012 foreign policy paper, entitled *An American Century*. While Romney claims that the Obama administration is "undermining allies, only to affirm several pages later that a Romney administration would "reassure allies", he provides very little clarification of

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who those allies are. [15]

Overall, Mitt Romney's foreign policy acumen has improved significantly since his 2008 run, when it was apparent in debates with Senator John McCain that this was not his area of expertise.[1] But all the positions which Romney has advocated are standard Republican Party talking points, such as robust defense spending and strong ties to Israel.

Some argue that a Romney presidency would represent a more hawkish approach to U.S. foreign policy.[2] But as Heather Hurlburt put it, Romney's tough rhetoric is "the kind of posturing that may be effective with the primary electorate but will be quite embarrassing if he winds up in office." Furthermore, the experienced staff of foreign policy advisors Romney has assembled indicates the triumph of realism and pragmatism over ideology. The simple truth is that a Romney foreign policy would not significantly alter current U.S. foreign policy. [19] The greatest distinction between Obama and Romney is of a stylistic nature; one is more measured, the other bolder. There is very little substantial difference of opinion between them.

## Conclusion

American presidential elections are fascinating to observe; each election cycle follows a particular pattern. During the primary season, the candidate's statements are abstract, generalized, and usually employ ideologically-specific language. Once nomination is guaranteed, the language used for particular issues becomes precise, the ideological language remains, but is not employed as often, as the candidate attempts to secure support from undecided voters and independents.

Romney's use of language portrays a candidate with firm ideas and unchangeable policy positions. However, it is more realistic to expect that these ideas and policy positions would probably be altered to fit the realities of foreign policy challenges imposed upon the incumbent of the White House. Romney would be a conservative American president who would use strong, bellicose language, but keep the status quo once in office.

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**Aaron T. Walter** is a Ph.D. student of the Department of International Relations and European Studies at the Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Joštova 10, Brno, Czech Republic. His research concentrates on U.S. foreign policy towards Israel.

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[1] Mitt Romney has corrected this for his 2012 campaign. In addition to assembling a highly qualified group of advisors, he has also traveled abroad. In July 2011, he visited London and met with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and British defense minister Liam Fox. According to the website, *Politico*, while "Romney isn't the first presidential candidate to head to London as part of the campaign — Barack Obama also held a 2008 fundraiser there to raise money from American expatriates. But the then-senator got a different reception from British officials: Cameron, who was the head of the minority Tory party in 2008, held an official meeting with Obama, as did Blair. And Obama got an official meeting with then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown."

[2] Please see these *Foreign Policy* articles: "How Romney Will Attack Obama: Looking ahead to the biggest foreign-policy debates of the general election" by Joshua Keating, "Fighting Words," and "Tilting at Windmills," by Michael

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Cohen, in support of Mitt Romney's hawkish foreign policy rhetoric, while "Elephants in the room" by James Traub, "Getting the Gipper Wrong," and "A Sheep in Wolf's clothing" by Michael Cohen indicate how rhetoric is quite different than reality upon taking office.