

Obama's Cautious Step Forward on Middle Eastern Democracy

Written by Nicolas Bouchet

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NICOLAS BOUCHET, JUN 4 2011

In his speech on the Middle East on 19 May, Barack Obama declared that 'it will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy.'^[1] The details of what he said did not amount to a bold strategic shift for the Middle East. Instead, this prudent president took a welcome but cautious step forward in reshaping the US policy in the region.

American leaders usually want to impress on their audiences that democracy is always one of the goals the United States pursues abroad. Hence Obama admitted that up to now there has hardly even been a pretense of that in relations with countries of the Middle East, where realpolitik has ruled. If George W. Bush was the first president to address the issue of democracy in US policy towards Middle East, however ineptly, it is going too far to say, as Walter Russell Mead did, that Obama has now 'embraced his inner Bush'.^[2] He has not suddenly thrown off his realist cloak to reveal a Wilsonian uniform. Obama was never the calculating realist some saw when he took office, and he is unlikely to now show himself to be a wide-eyed idealist either. He is not a president given to extremes.

A consistent reaction?

The Obama administration's overall approach to democracy promotion in its first two years has been deliberately low-key.^[3] It has tried, not always successfully, to develop a more consistent US approach to supporting reforms and criticizing human rights abuses, even if to critics this has not been vocal enough, while openly acknowledging that this must compete with broader American interests.

If indeed, as the US president said, 'after decades of accepting the world as it is in the region, we have a chance to pursue the world as it should be' when it comes to the Middle East, this would certainly be a major shift after decades of pursuing American interests in the region through alliances with its autocratic rulers. But it remains to be seen how much the American reaction to the Arab Spring constitutes such a shift.

It would be wrong to say that Washington was caught completely unawares by the protests that have spread throughout the Arab world. Last year Obama issued a Presidential Study Directive that led to a classified report that highlighted the risks posed by the lack of political reforms in the region and warned of the potential for popular unrest. Nonetheless, the speed and scale of events has clearly left the administration trying to ride the wave, seeking at the same time to protect traditional security interests and to live up to its rhetoric on democracy and human rights.

As Thomas Friedman put it, American policy in the Middle East now is as much about how to 'manage the unavoidable and avoid the unmanageable'.^[4] So far the Obama administration has not been able to do the latter as consistently its rhetoric suggests. In Egypt Washington eventually helped leverage its long term ally Hosni Mubarak out of power when it became clear that his position had become untenable and before violence escalated further. Yet, it did not seem willing or able to do the same with Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen as it descended to a state nearing civil war. It was easier for Obama to criticize Libya and Iran for political and rights abuses, but his few words

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on the repression of peaceful protests by America's Bahraini allies were tempered by speaking of their having a 'legitimate interest in the rule of law' that is hardly credible. And of course the regime in Saudi Arabia remains the great unmentionable, either for its domestic shortcomings or for its counter-revolutionary actions across the region.

In Syria there are many good practical and prudential reasons why the Obama administration cannot react to the regime's repression in the same way as it did to Libya's. And Washington does not have the leverage in Damascus that it has in Cairo. Nonetheless, it was too much hedging for Obama to suggest in his speech that President Bashar Al-Assad could still lead his country into a democratic transition when events had made it painfully obvious that it was too late for that. America was relatively quick in calling on Mubarak to go; it is hard to see what it gained by being much slower in condemning forthrightly the violence by Assad's troops.[5]

In the Middle East as elsewhere, it is not enough for Barack Obama to have a good rhetoric on democracy. In order to have real credibility, he and his administration need to adopt at least a minimal or baseline level of criticism for abuses and repression, and apply it consistently across countries, regardless of the specific context or whether they are allies or not.

From words to actions

Barack Obama's 19 May speech was flagged as 'Cairo 2' in reference to his landmark address to the Arab world in 2009, but this was more a remake than a sequel. He offered more specifics for action by the United States, but there was still more emphasis on polished words and generalities in support of popular aspirations in the region. An approach that was fine for a newly elected president in 2009 leaves his audience in 2011 unclear as to how far he is prepared to go to turn rhetoric into policy.

Expectations that Obama's speech would amount to a call for a Marshall Plan for the Middle East and North Africa to ensure that the initial democratic gains won by popular protests are consolidated were unrealistic. Against that historic benchmark, the address revealed a much, much more modest approach.

The more detailed section of Obama's speech concerned the economic sphere where conventional and uncontroversial policies – debt relief, loan guarantees, schemes to support trade and investment – and funds are easier to find. No such details were offered for supporting political reforms specifically, nor was there any mention of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which explicitly links US foreign assistance to the meeting of benchmarks for political freedom. This is a shame when considered that democracy assistance can function on a fraction of economic aid, never mind military aid.

One cannot be too critical of the scale Obama's proposals. This is not 1947 and the United States is no economic condition to offer a Marshall Plan for the Middle East, at least not on its own.[6] Not any more than it could afford to go it alone in the booming 1990s when it depended on its allies and the international financial institutions to help bankroll and reform Russia and support the former Eastern Bloc countries in central and eastern Europe.

Unfortunately, the G8 summit in France did not elaborate further how or whether the United States and its major Western allies intend to assist political changes specifically in the Middle East. The focus of the G8 aid pledges to Egypt and Tunisia remained firmly on economic stabilization with only a general mention that the disbursement of aid tranches would be tied to economic and democratic reforms. The economic problems of Egypt and Tunisia are real and sizeable, and economic aid pledges of between \$20 and \$40 billion, if they are kept by G8 members and the international financial institutions, are needed to help the transitions in these countries. Yet the lesson of Western aid to Russia and the post-Communist states in the 1990s is that support for economic stabilization needs to be balanced by a coherent and sustained effort in support of building democratic political institutions and supporting pluralism.

If Barack Obama wants to seize the opportunity of this historic moment of political change to support democratization in the Arab world, his administration needs to fill in the details of *how* the United States and the West (or, better still, the broader international community) will offer concrete, sizeable and sustained help towards securing political

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reforms throughout the region in the coming months and years. The events of the Arab Spring have shown just how difficult it remains for the United States to square the circle from 'the world as it is' to 'the world as it should be'.

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[1] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-barack-obama-prepared-delivery-moment-opportunity>

[2] <http://blogs.the-american-interest.com/wrm/2011/05/19/obama-embraces-his-inner-bush/>

[3] 'Nicolas Bouchet, 'Barack Obama's democracy promotion at midterm', *The International Journal of Human Rights* Volume 15, Issue 4, 2011, Pages 572 – 588.

[4] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/18/opinion/18friedman.html?_r=1

[5] <http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2011-05-16/syria-obama-needs-to-speak-up/>.

[6] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/20/world/middleeast/20assess.html?_r=1&adxnnl=1&ref=world&adxnnlx=1305871589-P8zmSn4zxovDwvcxF5KQxg

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