



The Kerry-Qatar Ceasefire Document: What it Says About American Strategy in the Middle East

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 261, August 3, 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Last week's failed ceasefire proposal by John Kerry highlights the clash between the Obama administration's approach to the Middle East, and the strategy preferred by Israel and other American allies in the region. Alas, US policy fails to distinguish between pragmatism and moderation, while evincing reduced support for its regional allies in favor of a less interventionist approach. This suggests an inability to discern between situations which require a conciliatory approach and those which require assertiveness.

There has been widespread consternation in Israel over the Israel-Hamas ceasefire document proposed by US Secretary of State John Kerry last week. Not only did Kerry's proposal accede to many of Hamas' demands, it upgraded Hamas' international standing. Israel was not the only actor that was dumbfounded. The European Union, the Palestinian Authority and the Arab League all back the Egyptian ceasefire proposal, not the Kerry document – which was heavily influenced by Hamas' backers, Qatar and Turkey.

The US has subsequently altered its ceasefire proposal to incorporate several Israeli concerns. However, if the leaked transcript of the tough conversation between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu is genuine, it would seem that underlying tensions remain.

Moreover, even if the leaked ceasefire document was only a draft of some ideas, the fact that it was even presented opens a window into the way of thinking within the Obama administration.

The question then is; what lay behind this mishap, and what does it say about US strategy towards the Middle East more generally?

The tendency has been to focus on Kerry himself or the rising death toll in Gaza. However, the core of the problem lies in the clash between the Obama administration's strategy towards the Middle East, and the strategy preferred by America's core allies in the region.

For Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Authority, the key threats come from Iran and from radical Sunni Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. They seek to maintain and promote a balance of power against these forces. An advance of these radical forces in one place is viewed as having negative political and strategic consequences in other places. These states look to the US to provide the leadership required to confront these forces. Consequently, they seek a ceasefire that weakens Hamas and they expect the US to strongly support them in pursuing that objective.

In contrast, the Obama administration does not view Islamism as an overarching threat to the US, and it champions a grand strategy of retrenchment that seeks to maintain quiet and minimize military intervention. The administration is not enamored of Islamism, but it distinguishes between Al Qaida, which needs to be confronted, and the Muslim Brotherhood (including previous Morsi regime in Egypt and the like), which it believes can be successfully engaged.

Tarring all Islamists with the same brush, and confronting them collectively is viewed as inducing a boundless commitment to unreachable objectives that will only serve to unite disparate groups into a common anti-American cause. Therefore, according to this administration thinking, the US should be less assertive so as to avoid "blowback" – counter-balancing. Instead, Washington seeks to manage regional conflicts, to keep things quiet.

The administration argues that retrenchment is not isolationism, and that the US remains deeply engaged in the Middle East. It has engaged Muslim publics and the Iranian regime, while deepening strategic consultations with Israel and its Gulf allies in an attempt to reassure and restrain them over Iran.

But America's allies are not reassured. For them, the Kerry-Qatar ceasefire document is part of a pattern. They look at the equanimity with which the Obama administration greeted the Muslim Brotherhood take-over of Egypt, the rise of ISIS in Iraq, and the administration's failure to stand behind the 'red line' it drew in Syria, and they are worried. Their biggest fear is that US policy aims to "kick the can down the road" rather than confront Iran over its nuclear program. They believe that only an assertive US policy backed by the credible threat of an American military strike will induce the required level of pragmatism for the Iranians to back down.

The fact that Obama has adopted a relatively modest strategy is not the problem per se; rather the problem lies in three specific places.

First, it is necessary to recognize the difference between pragmatism and moderation. Islamists like Hamas can be pragmatic, but they are not “moderate.” Empowering genuine moderates increases moderation. However, increasing the power of pragmatists usually reduces their pragmatism, because it reduces the constraints that make them pragmatic in the first place. On the contrary, encouraging such pragmatism requires limiting their capabilities and imposing costs for aggression.

Second, in order to achieve this objective with a less interventionist grand strategy, the US needs to support its core allies more, not less. This was the essence of the Nixon doctrine that accompanied the US withdrawal from Vietnam, and which led to increased US support for Israel.

Third, if a more modest US strategy is not to collapse into appeasement, it must be able to discern between situations that require assertiveness and those that do not.

The threat of a nuclear Iran that will trigger nuclear proliferation in a region where radical Islamists like ISIS could eventually get control of such weapons – requires American assertiveness. Similarly, though on a smaller scale, American assertiveness regarding a ceasefire in Gaza must be directed not just towards quiet for its own sake, but to managing the conflict on terms that weakens Hamas, thereby dampening the morale among proponents of the radical Islamist cause throughout the region.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity
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