



Where are You Going, President Obama?

by Prof. Shmuel Sandler

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: American interventions in the Gaza conflict have been puzzling. The Obama administration chose to support the Hamas-friendly Turkish-Qatari ceasefire proposal and failed to recognize the emerging bloc between the more moderate Middle Eastern states. Its treatment of Egypt is baffling. The Obama administration seems not to understand the current power configuration in the region and the dangers of the growing Islamist movement.

American interventions in the Gaza conflict have been very difficult to understand. Washington acted against its own strategic interests in prodding Israel to pull back from clubbing Hamas, and in involving Turkey and Qatar – the lawyers and financiers of Hamas – into the ceasefire negotiations, while snubbing Egypt.

Some have attributed American actions to the clash of personalities between Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US President Barack Obama. But this is an insufficient and probably irrelevant explanation. States overcome personal feelings. The strength or weakness of personal relations between leaders cannot adequately explain the foreign policy of a world power.

Washington's reluctance to involve itself more deeply in the Middle East has also been suggested as an explanation for Washington's policies. But this too is an insufficient explanation, since the US played an active role in trying to mediate a ceasefire.

Unfortunately, there is no choice but to conclude that Washington simply does not recognize the realities of today's Middle East, and ignores potential opportunities. Its regional foreign policy has been based on serious errors of judgment.

The Obama administration has failed to recognize the emergence, importance and opportunities presented by an axis of moderate pro-American Middle East states that developed during the recent crisis. Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, many Gulf states (with the exception of Qatar), and Israel all shared similar interests in this conflict, as did Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority. They all sought the dramatic weakening of the radical Islamic, Iranian-backed Hamas. In one way or another, they supported Israel's military operation against Hamas. Washington declined to support this emerging bloc.

The most bewildering American action was Secretary of State John Kerry's support for the Hamas-friendly Turkish-Qatari ceasefire proposal, which undercut a much more strategically sound Egyptian-Israeli ceasefire proposal. Moreover, Turkey and Qatar are promoting the subversive Islamist forces in the Middle East, including Hamas. How can this be in America's interests?

Kerry's failed ceasefire foray also suggests that he simply refused to understand the power politics of the region. Turkey and Qatar indeed have close relations to Hamas, but in final analysis it is Egypt that has the leverage on Hamas because it holds the keys to the Rafah crossing. Only Egypt and Israel can give the people of Gaza access to the outside world. And yet Kerry did not invite Egypt to the negotiations he was holding in Paris. Ignoring Egypt in this way makes no sense whatsoever. Moreover, as it turns out, Qatar and Turkey could not deliver Hamas; the organization violated all ceasefires negotiated by its two lawyer-states. Ultimately, Hamas had to accept the original Egyptian proposal of an unconditional ceasefire.

US behavior towards Egypt is worrying. The Obama administration seems incapable of dealing squarely with the newly elected Egyptian President Al-Sisi, because he deposed the Muslim Brotherhood government. The US even suspended part of its foreign aid to the most important Arab state, risking an Egyptian realignment with Russia, which is folly.

Perhaps Washington was seized with the thesis, advanced by certain American thinkers, that views the Muslim Brotherhood as a pragmatic actor and a potential ally against more extreme iterations of Islam. This could also explain the Obama administration's misperception of the AKP, Turkey's ruling party. Turkey's leader Erdogan heads a party that is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. Erdogan is driving a foreign policy that distances his country from the West – a policy fueled by Islamist and neo-Ottoman impulses. Yet Erdogan remains Obama's best friend. Strangely, Obama befriends a rabidly anti-Western and openly anti-Semitic leader. Many Arab states fear this neo-Ottoman ambitious foreign policy.

The Obama administration naively welcomed the so-called Arab Spring, without understanding its destructive effects. The biggest threat to Middle

Eastern stability is the current collapse of states. The Islamist movements that have become more powerful in the region have a transnational agenda which seeks to undermine the current state structure, hoping to build an Islamist Caliphate.

By contrast, the leadership of Egypt, as embodied in President Al-Sisi, is a force for stability, as it holds an Egypt-first foreign policy. Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, they are motivated primarily by Egyptian interests. They are not lovers of Zion; but they understand the threat of Hamas to Egypt. Other Arab states in the region understood the Muslim Brotherhood threat and joined the newly-elected regime in Egypt in opposing Hamas.

Washington mistakenly viewed the Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt as legitimate because it was elected in democratic elections. The US traditionally promotes democracy in the world. Obama abandoned President Mubarak in 2011, and still is hesitant to accept the Al-Sisi regime that removed the Muslim Brotherhood.

Yet, Obama should be reminded that democracy is sustained by an appropriate political culture and cannot spring over night as a result of democratic elections. Several authoritarian regimes came to power via the ballot – including the Bolsheviks in Russia and the Nazis in Germany.

The dilemma between idealism and self-interest is ever present in American foreign policy. However, idealists who ignore reality bring chaos instead of stability. Shallow realism mixed with misguided idealism is the worst possible combination for American foreign policy.

Shmuel Sandler is senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies and professor of Political Science at Bar-Ilan University.

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