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Obama and America’s “Imperial Temptation” in the Middle East

President Obama is replicating the self-damaging policies of his predecessors in a region vital to US interests.

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Following President Obama’s address to an audience of Israeli students in Jerusalem last week, progressive commentators in the United States hailed the speech as “a passionate appeal for peace” that “placed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict squarely back on his agenda.” But those intoxicated by Obama’s rhetoric will soon experience a painful hangover. For the President’s Israel speech and the rest of his Middle East trip were focused, first and foremost, on domestic politics here in the United States. And Obama’s Middle East strategy is marked by a growing discrepancy between the arrogance of America’s regional agenda and its declining capacity to realise this agenda.

Understanding the tragedy of Obama’s Middle East policy requires some historical perspective. Two decades ago, America came out of the Cold War and the first Persian Gulf War with a degree of strategic supremacy like the world had not seen for centuries. This supremacy seemed especially pronounced in the Middle East. Since then, though, America has not been

content to maintain its primacy in the Middle East, defend its interests there, and deal effectively with the region's complex political and security dynamics. Instead, it has succumbed to a post-Cold War temptation to act as an imperial power in the Middle East, trying to coerce political outcomes with the goal of consolidating a pro-American regional order.

The United States did this by retaining military forces on the ground in Saudi Arabia and other Arab states after the first Gulf War—something it did not do, to any significant extent, during the Cold War. It did this by levelling sanctions against Saddam Hussein's regime that led to the deaths of more than a million Iraqis, including half a million children. It did this after 9/11 by invading Afghanistan and Iraq and pursuing prolonged occupations that have killed hundreds of thousands of civilians. It is doing this today with escalating sanctions, covert operations, and cyber-attacks against Iran. Linked to all of these policies is Washington's perpetual insistence that everyone in the region not just accept Israel but tolerate virtually any definition of its security requirements and territorial needs put forward by the Israeli government.

This imperial turn has proven not just quixotic but deeply damaging to American standing, in the Middle East and globally. As a presidential candidate in 2008, Barack Obama seemed to understand this when he pledged not just to withdraw US forces from Iraq but to end what he called the "mindset" that led America into the strategic mistake of invading Iraq in the first place. But, as president, Obama has pursued the same kinds of policies as his predecessors, extending the damage they did to America's strategic position.

Among other self-damaging policies, Obama has, like his predecessors, bought into the proposition that an Israel with nearly absolute freedom of military initiative bolsters US supremacy in the Middle East, by helping to subordinate regional players aspiring to some measure of strategic independence. Consequently, he is presiding not just over a stalled Middle East peace process, but over the very demise of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In this context, Obama's primary mission in Israel was making peace not between Israelis and Palestinians but with the Israel lobby and Congress, to boost his chances of passing a domestic agenda before congressional elections in 2014. While the Israel lobby does not take positions on domestic issues, it nonetheless has real impact on a president's ability to get domestic initiatives through Congress—for congressmen are less willing to take politically difficult votes, even for a president of their own party, if that president's foreign policies generate friction with the lobby.

In Jerusalem, Obama was out to persuade “pro-peace” constituencies in his electoral coalition that he has not abandoned the project of Israeli-Palestinian peace—but without offering the substantive definitions of the requirements for a viable two-state solution that so offend the Israel lobby. He made only the most passing reference to prior statements about 1967 borders as an essential baseline for negotiating a territorial settlement, or to halting Israeli settlements as essential to progress.

More tellingly, Obama’s admonitions that only direct negotiations with Israel can produce peace and that Palestinians must not try the “short cut” of seeking further UN recognition for a Palestinian state are clear signals that realising Palestinian rights is not his priority. Two decades of direct talks between Israel and Palestinians have produced neither peace nor a Palestinian state. While Israel continues vaguely professing interest in peace—and Obama insists the Palestinian Authority help police Israel’s ongoing occupation of the West Bank—for most Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims there is no moral case for peace (much less Israeli security) when Palestinian rights remain subjugated.

If Obama were serious about Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, he would have the United States sponsor Palestinian membership in the United Nations, not veto it—so that the International Criminal Court could hear Palestinian claims about occupation and Israeli human rights violations. But Obama won’t do that—even though US support for Israel’s occupation of Arab populations and military aggression grows ever more damaging to America’s standing as regional publics become more mobilised—because he is on board with the established strategy. And so he promotes a peace process—not actual peace, just a process—designed to protect Israel’s capacity to dominate its neighbours militarily.

Obama’s support for Syrian oppositionists reflects the same sort of hubristic thinking. His administration started backing opposition elements in 2011, not to help Syrians but to weaken Iran’s regional position and perhaps even spark the Islamic Republic’s overthrow. This proved unrealistic, for Assad’s government even today represents sizable constituencies. As time passed and Assad didn’t fall, concern that jihadi extremists gaining ever greater prominence in opposition ranks would target US interests (as happened in Libya) prompted the administration to temper its stance in advance of the 2012 US presidential election. Now it is returning to the imperial game, disregarding risks to both US security interests and regional stability. That’s why, in contrast to his charade on the Palestinian issue, Obama put real effort during his Middle East trip into brokering a renewal of Israeli-Turkish relations—for, in Washington’s view, Israeli-Turkish cooperation could facilitate a renewed push for Assad’s removal.

Just three days after Obama's Jerusalem speech, Secretary of State John Kerry told reporters in Baghdad, with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki beside him, that Kerry's predecessor, Hillary Clinton, assured him Maliki "is going to do whatever I say." (Maliki immediately replied, "We won't do it.") Though fobbed off as a "joke," Kerry's talking points for what he later described as "spirited" private talks with Maliki reflected a conviction that Washington can in fact leverage Baghdad's compliance with US demands on Syria. Kerry told Maliki that barring Syria-bound Iranian aircraft from Iraqi airspace is a condition for Iraq's inclusion in discussions of Syria's post-Assad future. Kerry also warned that failing to cooperate in ending the Syrian conflict on Washington's preferred lines—through Assad's removal—raises the danger that fighting will "spillover" and destabilise Iraq.

This ignores that Maliki's interests are profoundly threatened by Assad's prospective displacement by US/Saudi/Turkish-backed opposition forces. (That's why Maliki said that, while wanting good relations with Saudi Arabia, he will conclude a formal alliance with Iran if Assad falls.) The most likely result of rebel "success" is not the Assad government's replacement by a coherent, nationwide alternative. It's Syria's devolution into warring fiefdoms, with forces loyal to what's left of the government battling increasingly fractious opposition militias that fight each other as much as they fight the Assad camp. Under these circumstances, Washington has no plausible claim it can stop extremist jihadis now fighting in Syria from taking their campaign for a new Salafi ascendancy into Iraq.

Maliki has a clear interest in seeing the Syrian conflict stop. But the only credible way this can happen is if America and others backing Syrian rebels get behind a new political compact for Syria, based on power-sharing between government and opposition. Until then, Iraq's interests—like those of Iran, Russia, and China—lie in thwarting efforts by Washington and its partners to remake the regional balance by targeting the Assad government. That's a recipe for prolonged carnage, in Syria and perhaps elsewhere, that smarter—and less imperial—US policy could avert.