

Obama's Middle-East Challenges

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Abstract -The current American president Barack Obama came into office in 2009, with an overloaded agenda for the Middle-East, but he failed to carry out most of his goals. What were the reasons behind this failure? Several constraints limited Obama's ability to achieve his objectives. The first one was the financial crisis which absorbed most of Obama's political energy and shifted his interest away from the Middle East. The second obstacle was the nature of the American political system and the resistance that Obama encountered from most of the strong traditional political elements. The last one was the unexpected political developments that took place in the Middle-East including the rise to power of the radical right in Israel, the uprisings in some Arab countries, the emergence of Daesh phenomenon and finally the recent rapprochement between United States and Iran.



ملخص- وصل الرئيس الأمريكي باراك أوباما إلى الحكم سنة 2009 بأجندة مثقلة للشرق الأوسط ، ولكنه لم ينجح في تحقيق أغلب أهدافه . فما الأسباب التي كانت وراء هذا الفشل؟

عملت الكثير من العوائق على التقليل من قدرة أوباما على تحقيق أهدافه ، أولها الأزمة المالية الدولية التي امتصت أكبر قدر من طاقة أوباما السياسية وأدت إلى تحويل اهتمامه بعيدا عن الشرق الأوسط . العائق الثاني متعلق بطبيعة النظام السياسي الأمريكي وبالمقاومة التي واجهها أوباما من أغلب العناصر السياسية التقليدية القوية ، أما العائق الأخير فقد تمثل في التطورات السياسية المفاجئة التي عرفت منطقة الشرق الأوسط والتي تمثلت في وصول اليمين المتطرف إلى الحكم في إسرائيل وكذا الاضطرابات التي عرفت بها بعض الدول العربية إضافة إلى بروز ظاهرة (داعش) وأخيرا التقارب بين الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية وإيران .



The current president Barack Obama came to the presidency in 2009 with a very different declared policy for the Middle East. How did it happen that so little of his original agenda, has been achieved. How do we explain that?

One of the challenges to be faced as a student of politics is how to construct a satisfactory explanation for some complex questions, like why did Obama fail to carry out many of his goals in the Middle East?

It is possible to make two kinds of mistakes in developing an explanation; one is to be too simple in your explanation, to say that everything ended on one single factor. For example, some people talk about the very important role of the pro-Israeli lobby in the United States, and one possible explanation of Obama's failure is that the lobby prevented him to do what he wanted to do. I think that there is some truth in that but it is not the full explanation. So as analysts, we are trying to explain a complex question. We want not just a single factor to explain, but we want to explore other possibilities as well.

The other mistake that some analysts make is to treat every issue as so complex that you can't understand, unless you look at five or ten or fifteen different influences. Of course, in the world we live in, there are very complicated relations that come into account for certain historical developments. But as analysts, we can't point every single factor that may be important. We have to select a few that are the most important and that have most general relevance for our topic.

So, today, I will try to avoid two extremes. One, to make the answer to my question too simple by telling that there is just one reason, or too complicated by telling you twenty different things that influenced Obama and his policies. Although, if I wrote a novel, I might mention all the fifteen but as a political scientist, my job is really to focus on the three or four most important factors. That is the professor speaking to the students: When you do your political analysis, try to think of the three or four reasons that are the most important for explaining whatever the puzzle you are investigating.

In the United States, as you know, there was a tolerated institution of slavery. People like Obama in the sovereign state of the United States were

the property of white peoples. The civil war in my country resolved that issue and ended slavery, but racism and segregation continued. When I was young, atmosphere began to change and the institutions that separated blacks and whites were abolished, the legal and social barriers were removed. But it was still difficult to imagine in the United States a man with an African American heritage be elected, but he was elected and by a significant majority of the voters. So, it was a very historical moment, and I will tell you a few of the reasons that I think of the successful upcoming of the first African American president.

One of the elements that made Obama attractive to particularly younger voters is that he represented a new generation. He was relatively a young man at the time of the election and he did not represent the old well-known establishment figures. So, there was something new that appealed to Americans, and there was one issue that he had made central to his campaign and that was important to many Americans. Obama was relatively an experienced politician and came out clearly against the policy of George W. Bush when he invaded Iraq in 2003. Obama was against Iraq war unlike most other American politicians, and by 2008 when Americans went to vote, public opinion returned against the war. So, Obama's ability to win the election was closely related to one of his positions on an important Middle East issue. This vote was for many Americans, their way of saying "stop the war in Iraq". That was an important point to remember.

As many of you know, Barack Obama had some background of his own in Muslim world. As a young man, he had lived in Indonesia, his mother had married an Indonesian Muslim. He learnt speaking Bahasa Indonesian and lived in a Muslim environment. He personally is not Muslim although his middle name is Hussein. When he became president, he sword: "I Barack Hussein Obama" above the constitution of the United States. So, he had some sensitivity to Muslim world and the extent to which the United States in previous years had become alienated from the Muslim world for several reasons like Iraq and Palestine.

So, his first point, the first day of his presidency, was to say that the United States will seek a new relationship with Muslim world peoples based on mutual interest and mutual respect. He was trying to change the way

in which the United States would be seen in its relationship to the Muslim world.

So, he repeated then his intention to withdraw the American military forces from Iraq in a responsible way, not necessarily immediately, but he would withdraw them eventually by the end of the year 2011, which he did. He also said that he would withdraw from Afghanistan. So, he was clearly saying that the days where the United States sent its military to deal with problems in the Middle East or Afghanistan were coming to an end, and that priority would be given to diplomacy rather than to military intervention. That was a deliberate reaffirmation of a position he had taken as a political candidate.

A third point which was less explicit but of good sense, is that there was a change of emphasis when president Obama spoke about the issue of human rights and democracy. You may remember that for president George W. Bush, there was a strong emphasis on the United States which tried to promote its version of democracy in the Middle East, and the results have not been very successful, making many people in the United States questioning whether it was possible for a foreign country, as much as it may support and admire democratic political institutions, to force democracy on another people. The Bush administration was saying "we should try because the lack of democracy is the source of many problems in the world", and Obama's position was that democracy has to grow from within. It can't be forced from outside. Where it is developing, we should encourage it but we can't be the ones who make it up.

So, there was a shift of emphasis that required that United States would be still supportive of democratic movements when there was a possibility, but would not be intervening in the political affairs of other countries in the same way that George W. Bush administration had done. The simple phrase was "less emphasis on democratisation, more on diplomacy". That was the kind of shift of emphasis that Obama wanted to convey.

Next point is that the president George W Bush famously talked about an axis of evil of certain countries that were so reprehensible, that the United States would never deal with them diplomatically, and he had included Iran,

Iraq and did not explicitly include Syria, but more or less implied that Syria was part of this axis of evil. Obama never used that phrase, and said instead that the United States will seek to deal diplomatically even with its enemies, and he specifically mentioned Iran and Syria; countries that had been more or less treated as only enemies. He basically said "we need to have a diplomatic approach even to countries with which we have diplomatic differences". He mentioned specifically Iran and Syria.

In the final point, Obama said that the Israeli-Palestinian issue needed to be treated as a matter of urgency and high priority to get the diplomatic process going on between Israel and the Palestinians. He would try to persuade the government of Israel to stop building settlements in the occupied territories. These Colonies that are still today been built in the West Bank. So, he put the Palestinian issue on his agenda where Bush administration had essentially said: "It is too difficult It is up to the parties to do the negotiating ... If they need help, they can ask us. We will help them ... We are not going to push them away". Obama said: "No, we have the responsibility to push for Israeli-Palestinian peace including the stopping of the settlement colonies in the occupied territories".

So, this was his original outlines. Since more than six years after his original presentation of these ideas, most of these goals have not been achieved. So my question is what went wrong? what happened? I do not question Obama's original determination or his sincerity, but he failed in most of these objectives. Why? The president of the United States is a very powerful man, and yet he was unable to achieve his objectives. The major of my talk is going to be about why did he fail, and what might still be achieved in the short time that remains, and what would be the problems facing the new president in the Middle East look like most likely?

So, I will mention several big categories that limited President Obama's ability to achieve his goals, but one of the very first points that I need to remind everybody, is that just as Obama became president, the world economy was going into a deep decline. This happened very suddenly towards the end of 2008. The international financial system went into a very bad development. The American banking system began to fail and the industrial world economy and eventually the entire world economy went into a very severe recession,

and then much of the political capital and political energy that Obama had when he became president, had to be devoted to dealing with the immediate economic crisis. It is always an important factor in explaining political developments: Presidents, in any country, have to think about the well being of their people which means the economic problems of their countries, and the economic crisis in 2009 looked very badly deep.

The second reason that made it difficult for Obama to achieve many of his goals is that even though the American political system is built around the institution of presidency, it is also built on the concept of separation of powers. Congress has certain powers, judiciary has certain powers and of course the political system has developed in a way that interest groups, lobbies, businesses and rich individuals also have a great deal of influence. So, even if we change the president, the political system does not change so easily. So, very quickly, Obama began to encounter resistance from some of the more traditional political elements. Republican Party almost from the beginning wanted him to fail. There was almost no sense of cooperation between the two political parties. The existing lobbying groups and interest groups were still powerful, and on many of the issues that I have mentioned, there were strong interests. They did not want to see a change on our policies in the Middle East, or on the Palestinian issue and they tried to influence public opinion and Congress, and they had some success. President Obama is a very skillful politician, but he was confronting many people who wanted him to fail, and who had a lot of resources at their disposal to try to ensure this failure.

Third category of developments that made it difficult for Obama's policies to be carried out is that developments in the Middle East took place unexpectedly. And this happened all the time; whatever the plan you may have for your foreign policy, the world will surprise you. Something will happen: a revolution, a change of leadership, or an economic crisis in Europe. Something that forces you to pay attention to a different set of goals than your original set. In the Middle East, there were several things that occurred in the years after Obama became president, that forced him to shift his attention from his original goals.

Almost immediately, there were elections in Israel that brought to power a very hardline right wing, the Israeli government headed by the current prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This made it much more difficult for President Obama to find a way of using American influence to get Israelis to stop building settlements and to be cooperative on the issues of peace. The previous Israeli government had been a little bit less hard line, and Obama was faced in his will, with a new reality of rejectionists' government that did not want to cooperate on the peace issues.

Few years later, the uprisings which came to be known in some circles as the "Arab Spring" began in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya and Yemen, and it is clear that very few people in the American government had expected these developments, they were not sure how to respond to them. You can see some initial hesitation as regimes particularly in Egypt, with whom we had long stand relationships, encountered massive demonstrations against President Mubarak, and there was some debate within the US government: Should we stick with Mubarak? Should we support revolutionaries? Where was Egypt heading? So, there was a period of considerable uncertainty, and it showed in the policy making. There was hesitation and then there was support for change. There was intervention in Libya and there was not intervention in Syria or Bahrain. It was a difficult and strange period because nobody had a clear policy. That was the surprise number two.

Two other developments, one very negative for the region and for American policy and one promising, also changed the calculus in Washington. The negative one is the emergence in past years of the phenomenon of Daesh: the Islamic State in Syria and in Iraq. This happened shortly after American troops have been withdrawn from Iraq, and in the chaos left behind in Iraq and in Syria. Very suddenly, there was the emergence of a political movement that genuinely looked very dangerous for American interests in certain parts of the Middle East, because of its campaign against the state system of Iraq and Syria and beyond. So quiet, contrary to the preferences of President Obama, he found himself been drawn back into a certain kind of military role in Iraq. Not the same military role with hundreds of thousands of American troops in the country, but using airstrikes and working with Iraqi forces to try to limit and eventually defeat the Daesh forces there. So that was

unexpected and Americans have reacted to it, but were not part of any one of the original regional designs.

And the last development, from my stand point the more positive one, is the change of leadership which took place in Iran. As we began to see the new rhetoric and new statements from President Rohani and his foreign minister Zarif, the United States began to respond by saying: may be this is the moment to step forward with a diplomatic initiative towards Iran. It has always been part of the Obama's agenda, and we have seen for the past year a sustained successful negotiation to develop a framework for dealing with the so called nuclear issue in Iran, and to use that as a platform for beginning a slow but important normalisation of relations with Iran for some period of time. This is a very important and recent development.

What about the current situation as I understand it in Washington? the way in which the Obama's administration sees the Middle East issues in this last phase of his presidency?

As you all probably know, next year will be a presidential election year. President Obama cannot run for a third term. Next year, will be very full of craziness: people saying things that they do not mean, but they simply want to win the election. And it will be will be a difficult time for sensible foreign policy discourse. We have a little bit time in this administration to see which of Obama's Middle East challenges he will choose to focus on in the remaining time he has. I will talk of three of them briefly.

So, the first issue that Obama's administration is now going to concentrate on, is the possible completion of the negotiated agreement with Iran. This is the single most important development for the current administration. They have been negotiating now for most of the past year. They are recently beginning to be able to announce part of success in the negotiations. There is, now, a very detailed outline of the nature of the agreement, which needs three or more weeks to be completed. The opposition in the United States to the agreement is very strong. Almost the entire republicans now control both houses in Congress, and they are strongly against a deal with Iran. But in foreign policy, there are limits to how much congress can do to prevent the completion of an agreement. This is not a formal treaty and it

does not require the approval of Congress. So, if they can complete negotiations, and there are just a few details that remain, Congress will express its opposition but will not be able to prevent it, and interestingly the American public opinion is in favour of the agreement, even though pro-Israeli lobby is strongly against it. The prime minister of Israel was invited recently to come to the American Congress to speak against this agreement. It is very quiet unusual, for the Republicans in Congress, to invite a foreign head of state to come to speak in Congress against American foreign policy. President Obama refused to meet with Netanyahu when he was in Washington, and many Americans were offended by Netanyahu's interference in our internal affairs. This is becoming a big issue, and interestingly, I think Obama is going to win it, even though many Americans no longer support him.

On this issue, Americans are ready for a new relationship with Iran but without illusions, Iran is a difficult country to deal with. But, we have been enemies for thirty years and many people feel it is time to try a new diplomatic approach to an important country in the Middle East, where we have some common interests. We have common interests in Iraq; we both support the same government; we both oppose Daesh.

There are other areas as well: Afghanistan where a stable Afghan government is the goal of both countries, and there are probably other areas where the United States and Iran will find common interests. This is making Israelis very nervous, and also is making the Saudis and some of the Gulf states very nervous, and I understand it but you cannot change geography and you cannot change easily demography. Iran is where it is. It is a big state. It has certain resources and it is going to play an important role in the region. The Saudis would like to have it disappeared.

The second issue that Obama cannot wait dealing with now, is this fight against Daesh particularly in Iraq and also in Syria. This was not a fight he expected. It was not anywhere on his initial agenda. He wanted to get out of Iraq, he hesitated to get involved in Syria, but now, United States is engaged. Every day, American forces are working with Iraqi forces, in particular carrying out air strikes against Daesh in Iraq and In Syria.

The question in my mind is do they have a strategy? or is this just a

crisis management trying to keep things from getting worse? There have been some tactical successes in Iraq, the city of Tikrit was retaken by Iraqi forces but it is clear that things are moving very slowly and there is more or less cooperation with the Kurds and indirectly with the United States.

I think that in Iraq, what I can imagine eventually is that the trap from Daesh will be contained and eventually defeated. Syria, unfortunately, seems to be a much more complicated case and I do not think it will be brought to a resolution in the time that remains for Obama's administration. That is one issue which is likely to continue into the future with unfortunately a big source of instability for the region.

For political reasons, Obama was encountering domestic opposition. When he got himself elected president; he stopped pushing hard on the Palestinian issue in 2011. After he was elected in 2012, he had another chance with the new secretary of state, Secretary Kerry to tackle the issue one more time. The president was skeptical that he can do business with Prime Minister Netanyahu with whom he had a bad experience from the first administration, but he gave to the secretary of state a free hand to try. Secretary Kerry spent enormous time and energy, travelling to Israel, talking to the Palestinians, travelling to the Middle East to see if he could somehow break the impasse between Israelis and Palestinians into a positive dialogue about a two state peaceful solution. Those efforts also failed again for partly American political reasons. The mid-term election was coming up in 2014 and he wanted to stop pressuring Israel for those elections. So this was roughly a question of campaign. I think there is a question mark now as to whether the president, in his remaining year and a half useful time, will choose to address the very serious political and humanitarian crisis in Palestine, and will find a new approach that could possibly break the impasse.

My assumption now is that he will simply not choose to pursue a strong policy on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, specially because he needs support for his policy on Iran. Obama's political judgment is to achieve a deal with Iran. He accounts on the support of American public opinion even though Israel opposes it and Israel friends in congress oppose it, but he cannot in addition try to pressure Israel on account of getting support for the United States.

So, I am afraid that for the moment, the Palestine issue for American diplomacy in the Middle East is off the agenda, and that it, also, will be passed on to the next president. I think we will look back on this issue and regret that it was not resolved in the earlier period. I am not sure when, if ever, there was a good opportunity to find a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but as analyst, I would say it was probably in 1999.

Since then, it became harder and harder almost each year. It is almost impossible to imagine how you would construct a Palestinian state living side by side with an Israeli state in conditions of peace...So difficult. Disentangling the occupied territories from Israeli control made that many people have now given up on the so called two state solution. The problem of course is that there is no obvious easy alternative, and so on this issue, there is a stalemate. I underline that the problems of occupation and frustrations, I am afraid, will continue for some time.

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