

# One Year of Obama in the Middle East: Have Transatlantic Differences Narrowed?

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>> Under the Obama administration, the United States has moved closer to European positions on the Arab-Israeli peace process and the promotion of democracy and human rights in the Middle East, at least at the level of rhetoric. There has been no significant increase, however, in transatlantic cooperation on these questions. The United States is still trying to keep the initiative on Arab-Israeli issues to itself, and has not engaged European partners so far in its evolving policy on democracy issues. The Obama administration is coming under increasing criticism in the United States and the Middle East for ineffective policies on both of these topics, which is likely to lead to some rethinking over the next six months and could open the way to closer cooperation or, alternatively, greater friction with Europe. Early indications suggest that President Obama might disengage from Arab-Israeli diplomacy for the present in favour of other priorities.

## HAVE DIFFERENCES NARROWED?

While substantive differences between US and European policies on the Middle East peace process had already begun to decrease late in the Bush administration with the inauguration of the Annapolis process, they have narrowed much more during the first year of the Obama administration. The early appointment of former Senator George Mitchell as US envoy, and unambiguous statements from President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on the need to restart direct, meaningful negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians put the peace process (along with containing Iranian nuclear ambitions) back at the centre of the US Middle East agenda; where most Europeans believe it belongs. In particular, the administration's willingness to take a clearer position on the need to

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»»»»» freeze construction in Israeli West Bank settlements – and to have a public confrontation with the Israeli government over the matter – was more in keeping with European preferences. Moreover, the new US willingness to engage Syria and attempt to woo it away from the Iran/Hizbullah/Hamas camp was consonant with European views.

Although the Obama administration's initial foray into Israeli/Palestinian peacemaking failed due to Israel's refusal of a complete settlement freeze, early in 2010 there was still significant agreement between the United States and Europe on the need to press forward with restarting negotiations. They agreed in general on an approach of pressing Palestinians to enter negotiations – perhaps with a set of assurances from the United States and/or gestures from Israel – with a view to testing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's willingness to proceed. Europe and the United States also agreed in general on the need to support Palestinian Prime Minister Fayyad's efforts to build Palestinian Authority institutions. Following the bruising experience of Israel's 'Operation Cast Lead' in Gaza a year earlier, the Obama administration has become more aware of the fragility of Palestinian institutions and infrastructure, as well as developing a greater appreciation of European frustration in having to build and rebuild in the face of ongoing conflict.

Regarding democracy and human rights in the Middle East, the Obama administration's far softer, quieter approach to the issue in 2009 was music to the ears of many European governments. Obama and Clinton abandoned the strong rhetoric of former President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on the need for radical change in the region in these areas. They adopted instead the themes of 'mutual interest and mutual respect' with the Muslim world (for example, in Obama's June 2009 speech in Cairo) and emphasised the need for human development as much as, or even more than, the need for democracy (for example, in Hillary Clinton's December 2009 speech at Georgetown University).

Aside from rhetoric, the new administration abandoned Rice's 'transformational diplomacy' for a

return to traditional diplomacy, that is, state to state relations, particularly in the Middle East. The Obama administration did retain the central assistance programmes related to the Bush freedom agenda – the Middle East Partnership Initiative and the Millennium Challenge Account – and even increased their level of funding. But they also shifted democracy funding away from programmes undertaken in cooperation with civil society organisations and towards those implemented in cooperation with governments, as part of the effort to remove irritations in state to state relations. All of these changes brought US policies into closer alignment with European policies, advocating a slower, more patient approach to promoting democracy and human rights.

#### **WHERE DO TRANSATLANTIC DIFFERENCES REMAIN?**

While US and European positions on Middle East peace generally are now quite close, some important differences remain on certain issues and on how best to advance towards shared goals. First and foremost, European diplomats in Washington expressed dismay that in September 2009, the Obama administration backed down from its initial insistence on a full Israeli settlement freeze, and some said in early 2010 that they were still confused about what the new plan is. Other issues over which differences have emerged (within Europe as well as between the United States and Europe) are whether to engage directly with the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and how strongly to support Palestinian claims to East Jerusalem as a future capital. European observers sometimes voice uncertainty about whether the administration actually discourages or quietly encourages such differences (for example on Jerusalem), which might possibly be useful to US officials in their dealings with Congress.

Hamas' role in Palestinian politics remains a difficult issue and one on which anti-terrorism legislation and strong sentiment in the US Congress tie the Obama administration's hands to a great extent. The secular Palestinian leadership might well need

to reconcile with Hamas and resume Palestinian electoral politics at some point, whether negotiations with Israel resume or not – an issue on which the United States and Europe could find themselves at odds. Deteriorating conditions in Gaza, and to what extent it is feasible to maintain Gaza's isolation, might also emerge as an area of difference. And there is always the possibility that transatlantic differences over Israel's behaviour could sharpen, particularly should violence surge again in Gaza or the West Bank and Israel react as it has in the past.

Whether differences reemerge on democracy and human rights promotion will depend on events in the region and the Obama administration's internal deliberations. The current domestic turmoil in Iran, unforeseen a year ago, points to the sort

of developments that could cause differences. Should there be a sharp increase in protest activity in Egypt or a breakdown in the current *modus vivendi* in Lebanon, for example, it is possible that the United States

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and Europe might part company regarding the extent to which outside actors should support one political force or set of claims against another. In addition, there is already some rethinking inside the Obama administration about whether its quietist approach – raising democracy/rights issues privately with governments but refraining from public criticism and rhetoric – should be revised. There are no dividends to show from the policy to date, and expressions of disillusionment from civil society groups in the region are increasing.

### IS COOPERATION MORE EFFECTIVE?

While positions on some issues related to Middle East peace, and on the importance of multilateralism, have altered during the Obama administration, the United States' way of dealing with European allies has not necessarily changed much

so far. There appears to be more regular communication between US and EU envoys and their staff than there is between US officials and European diplomats in Washington. In any case, it appears that the basic messages in US communications with European partners have stayed the same as they were in previous administrations: first, please do not come up with any initiatives of your own and second, please write a cheque to support the Palestinians. This is a source of frustration for European diplomats, who also feel that in general their US counterparts do not share much information on the state of diplomacy with Israelis and Arabs and when they do, share it unevenly – that is, more with British than with other European counterparts.

While the appointment of a senior, experienced US envoy for peace has in general been a positive development in European eyes, it has also highlighted another area of ongoing controversy: the role of the Quartet (EU, US, UN and Russia). The Quartet has been much less active during the Obama administration than it was in the Bush era – issuing only two policy statements in 2009, for example, compared to five in 2008 and at least nine in 2007 – largely because there is an active US envoy. In terms of substantive positions inside the Quartet, the United States and EU have often been in agreement, whereas Russia has often taken off in different directions. But it remains the case that some Europeans resent that the Quartet functions as little more than an international rubber stamp for US policy decisions, and one employed with decreasing frequency at that.

On promoting democracy and human rights, while there is greater US/European harmony now, ironically there is less effective cooperation. US officials working on the follow-up to Obama's June 2009 Cairo speech, for example, have not even considered cooperation with Europe. There are two principal reasons for this. First, there are few Obama administration initiatives in this area so far – and European initiatives such as the Union for the Mediterranean tend not to include the United States – and therefore little on which to cooperate. The economic, scientific, technical initiatives that followed President

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»»»»» Obama's June 2009 Cairo speech are small in scale and, even if there were US/European cooperation, could not be expected to make much of a difference. The most significant event currently planned is a Global Entrepreneurship Summit to be held on April 26–27 in Washington, to which European individual entrepreneurs and philanthropists will be invited but in which there is no envisioned partnership with European governments.

Second, during the Bush administration, the United States and Europe actually used cooperation on the democracy issue as a way to bridge their differences after the Iraq war (notably at the 2004 Sea Island G8 Summit, where the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative was launched). As such basic differences do not currently exist – although it is possible they will resurface, for example, on Iran – there is no need to use the democracy issue in that way. The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative continues as a multilateral instrument, and Secretary of State Clinton attended the most recent 'Forum for the Future' in Rabat in November 2009. There is no idea of using BME-NA as a major focus of US policy, however.

**WHAT ARE THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS?**

Beyond whether Europe and the United States agree on either the substance or the execution of policies, there is a much larger problem: neither seems to have a clear strategy to promote either Middle East peace or democracy right now. President Obama was frank in acknowledging that his administration relied far too much on his personal prestige to get Israelis and Palestinians to the table in his first year in office.

Perhaps because electing the first African American president was such a big event for Americans, there has been a tendency in the first year of the Obama administration to believe that the rest of the world would be similarly awed. There was an unspoken assumption that President Obama would be able to easily obtain concessions from other nations – an Israeli settlement freeze, a halt to Iran's nuclear ambitions, a change in Syria's strategic posture –

that his predecessors could not. This has not been the case. It also turned out to be untrue that President Obama's laudable efforts at correcting US human rights abuses since 2001 would inspire other leaders to improve treatment of their own citizens. US officials are now realising – and sometimes implicitly acknowledging – that perhaps the Bush doctrine was not the only issue; the problems of the Middle East are genuinely difficult to resolve.

And so, as President Obama begins his second year in office, his administration's officials are back to the drawing board when it comes to the Middle East. So far they have not produced new ideas on the peace front, but rather have returned to the letters of assurance and confidence building measures tried in the past. On the democracy issue there has been a shift towards emphasis on government-to-government cooperation, coupled with relatively modest, apolitical, from-the-ground-up approaches focusing on economic opportunity and scientific and technical cooperation. But there is already concern that this quietist approach is being misinterpreted in the region – and perhaps in Europe as well – as a lack of interest in the issue. It is not producing the desired results.

There will thus be much soul-searching among US officials over the next six months or so about how to construct more effective policies. Real policy changes, however, will require greater engagement by a president who is largely consumed by domestic problems including unemployment, health care reform, and a political tide shifting against his party in the months leading up to congressional elections in November 2010. Indeed, US observers are reading Obama's failure to mention Middle East peace or democracy at all in his January 27 State of the Union address as a further distancing from these difficult issues and wondering if it will take another outbreak of violence in the region to claim his interest.

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