

The Truly New Middle East: Will Obama Blow It?

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A few days after former President Hosni Mubarak stepped down, the cover page of Newsweek, the American weekly news magazine, carried the following headline: "Egypt: How Obama Blew It", with nothing other than the photo of the U.S. President, and the name of the author of that week's lead article: Niall Ferguson.

Ferguson, a renowned historian and a Harvard professor, mercilessly attacked Obama and his administration for lacking a grand strategy. "For the second time in his presidency, Obama heard the footsteps of God resounding through events, jumped up to grasp a historic opportunity ... and missed it completely," he argued. In criticizing the administration for its handling of Egypt, Ferguson was hardly alone. Citing the administration's failure to anticipate the crisis and flip flopping in managing it, the line of Obama's critics kept getting longer.

By contrast, few pundits came to Obama's defense. They praised the sensibility by which his administration handled the crisis. By taking the backseat to those camped in Tahrir, and working behind the scenes to ensure that the Egyptian military exercise restraint and allow events to take their course, Obama acted in the best interest of both the United States and the Egyptian revolution, the argument went.

Only time will tell. It will certainly be some time, if at all, before the content of those long conversations between the Pentagon and the Egyptian military council eventually surface to shed some light on the nature and extent of America's role, if any, in

support of the Egyptian revolution. Moreover, and even then, we might still not know for sure. For one, it might be extremely difficult to ascertain if America's actions were at all needed to nudge the Egyptian military in the direction it has taken, as the Obama administration would probably like to be credited, or if that would have been its course of action anyway.

The above notwithstanding, it is quite shocking how sluggish the U.S. administration has been in formulating a concrete strategy to deal with what is evidently an emerging strategic reality. A few explanations have already been put forward. Some have argued that the Arab Spring brings America face to face with the first practical evidence of its hegemonic decline. With a divided government, a soaring budget deficit at home, and two ongoing wars abroad, the administration's ability to respond to, let alone intervene to shape the political transformation of the Middle East, is terribly limited. Others have pushed forward the idea that the political transformation sweeping the Arab world, while having huge repercussions on America's national security interests, has not altered the region's strategic balance. Not yet. Some of those have gone to the extent of suggesting that a "wait and see" approach is the right course of action.

With the above in mind, the news of a major foreign policy speech by President Obama this week to "reset" American policy in the Middle East is a move in a third direction. Or is it? According to some of his close advisors, Obama will use the speech to put Osama Bin Laden's death in the context of the upheaval sweeping the region,

including by presenting OBL as the past and Arab democrats and peaceful demonstrators as the future. If it indeed stops there, then nothing is new. If it doesn't, if Obama shows eagerness and readiness to support that future, then welcome to the new Middle East.

Here are some thoughts for Obama to consider if his anticipated speech is to move from the realm of rhetoric to that of policy:

Who's resetting what? For all the talk about Obama resetting American Middle East policy, it is actually the Arab world that is pressing the "reset" button this time. With two regimes already toppled, a few on the way out, and an Arab reawakening in the making, an old order is sooner or later giving way to a new one. As Thomas Friedman, the New York Times foreign affairs columnist, correctly put it, this Arab uprising is not political, it is existential. Arabs, humiliated by their autocrats and demeaned by the rest of the world, have decided to revolt "and because so many Arabs share these feelings, this Arab Spring is not going to end — no matter how many people these regimes kill." The faster Obama brings Washington to believe that, the faster and better the latter will be able to respond.

New order requires new rules: "Wait and see" isn't a policy; it is an excuse for not having one. Worse, it is a failure to grasp the extent and magnitude of the earthquake shaking the Middle East, and in the process American vital national interests.

Take Egypt for example. Under the "wait and see" pretense, Congress has so far objected to any bold action in support of post-revolution Egypt. In justifying such delay, some in Congress have sounded the readily available Muslim Brotherhood alarm bell. Others stand wary of a major shift in Egypt's foreign policy. As a result, and three months after the ouster of Hosni Mubarak, Obama is yet to reveal the contents of his much-hyped support package to Egypt's battered economy. Such stands and the call they justify are utterly shocking, if not for anything, for their obsolescence. For one, strategic shifts in post-revolution Egypt's foreign policy, towards a more independent stance and away from Mubarak's that lacked any

legitimacy, are unavoidable. Said differently, if a shift in Egypt's foreign policy is the nightmare that Washington's would hope to avoid then wait no more.

Resetting America's foreign policy in the Middle East, Take Two: Next Thursday's speech isn't Obama's first effort at "resetting" America's Middle East policy. His 2009 Cairo University speech was. In the later, Obama promised grandiose ideas that met much fanfare, but failed nevertheless to materialize. As a result, Arabs this time around are not sitting at the edge of their seat waiting for Obama. At "take two" therefore, President Obama must let go of his tendency to make big speeches, go beyond his eagerness to articulate "a unified theory" about the popular uprisings from Tunisia to Bahrain, and move to use the speech as the scene opener for specific and meaningful actions in support of the Arab Spring. Anything short of that will be a Cairo speech let down, take two.

Prioritize: Two issues here deserve particular attention. First and foremost is support for the emerging Arab democracies. If Bin Laden is indeed the past, and Egyptian youth are the future, Obama should use his speech to announce a substantial package of support to the Egyptian economy. That should include no less than total relief of debt Egypt owes the United States, as well as a substantial assistance package. Obama should also announce his administration's readiness to lead an international effort, maybe in the form of a donors' conference or a new Marshall Plan, in support of a comprehensive political, economic and social program to be laid down by Egypt's first democratically-elected government.

Second, if humiliation is indeed the driving force behind this Arab uprising and the tsunami unsettling the Middle East, then it is only logical to push to the forefront the one issue that is at the heart of Arabs' humiliation: Israel's continued occupation of Arab territories. Failing to realize this or to act on it, or even worse trying to impose the old rules to the new order, is the shortest route to failure.