

Obama's New Old Middle East Policy

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Last week President Obama gave a major policy speech on the Middle East which sought to present American policy and priorities to the world at a time of great change in the region. A wave of demonstrations has overthrown undemocratic regimes in some countries, contributed to civil conflict in others and been met by harsh government crackdowns in still others. Similarly, the killing of Osama Bin Laden, although not in the region, also is expected to have an impact on U.S. policy in the Muslim world more broadly.

Obama used his speech to call for substantial aid to Egypt as it seeks to develop into a more liberal and democratic state following the peaceful ouster of Hosni Mubarak earlier this year, and for a peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians based on 1967 borders. This represents a radical change in U.S. policy because during the presidency of George W. Bush, Obama's immediate predecessor, the U.S. gave substantial aid to Egypt and sought to make peace between Palestine and Israel based on the 1967 borders. President Bill Clinton, who preceded Bush in the White House, also sought to create peace between Israel and the Palestinians based on the 1967 borders while providing Egypt with significant financial assistance.

While the context for Obama's speech was different than in recent years, the tone of the speech, celebrating and advocating democracy in the Middle East, calling for peace between Israel and its neighbors, and implicitly calling for a major U.S. role in the region, was similar to what most recent U.S. presidents have said. What is perhaps most interesting about Obama's speech was that a president who has sought to create a new profile and role for the U.S. in the world, during a time of unprecedented change in the Middle East, proposed policies which are largely consistent with those of previous administrations.

This is not a reflection on Obama, but of a reminder both of how difficult it is to make real change in foreign policy, and how few policy options the world's only superpower, at least for now, has. For several decades American administrations sent billions of assistance dollars to Mubarak's authoritarian Egypt because it was necessary to ensure stability for a key U.S. ally and to encourage stability in the region. Today, following Mubarak's resignation with the potential for real democratic advance in Egypt, the U.S. has pledged to continue to send ample foreign assistance to that country as a means to promote stability there and in the region. In fairness, some of this money will go to help develop and strengthen Egypt's embryonic democratic institutions, but much of the money will help the state function better and facilitate economic development, goals that were just as strong during Mubarak's regime.

Similarly, while much has been made by hawkish supporters of Israel and domestic opponents of the President, over President Obama's invocation of 1967 borders as the basis for a peace agreement between Israel and Palestine, Obama's overall approach to framing this peace process is not very different from that of any of his recent predecessors. The 1967 borders, with some negotiation, have been at the center of most recent proposed agreements between Israel and Palestine. Obama's efforts to bring peace to that region are characterized not by great change from those of Bush or Clinton, but by substantial continuity.

The similarity between Bush and Obama on these issues is something of a reflection of the bipartisan nature of American foreign policy and of the consistency of U.S. commitments, but that is an overly positive interpretation. Whether Egypt is authoritarian or potentially moving towards democracy the U.S. has been committed to giving assistance to that country. There has been very little talk in recent decades about any other possible approach to Egypt. Similarly, whether the administration is Democratic or Republican, regardless of who is in power in the Palestinian Authority or Israel, and despite unprecedented developments in the broader Middle East, the U.S. approach is modified 1967 borders with some kind of security guarantees for Israel.

Developing more foreign policy tools and relying less on the same tool, foreign assistance, to seek a broad range of goals in a broad range of settings is a key task for U.S. foreign policy moving forward. The Obama administration has, like its predecessors, not been able to do this, but with so many countries that are neither democratic nor authoritarian, and neither dependable ally nor clear foe, this will become even more important.