

MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

Letter from Washington Middle East Policy: Stagnation, Confusion & Peril BY PROFESSOR MICHAEL C HUDSON

Washington is enjoying a mostly pleasant summer. The Atlantic seashore two hours away is packed with carefree beachgoers of all ages. Looking at them you wouldn't think that U.S. politics had sunk to the lowest level of dysfunction in the memory of veteran Washingtonians.

Public opinion toward the Congress and the President has turned rancid in the wake of the cascading economic and financial crisis. Americans were appalled at the spectacle of the bitter and embarrassing fight over raising the debt ceiling. The historic principle of compromise that makes our cumbersome system of government work seems to have been thrown in the trash by ideological extremists, primarily the "tea party" faction of the Republican Party. An economy almost dead in the water is failing to produce jobs; infrastructure is crumbling; stock market gyrations are fueling panic. If ever there were a time for bold presidential leadership this is it. But it's not there. Democrats are seething over Obama's lackluster performance.

But wait... you thought this letter was about the Middle East! Well, it is—but you can't understand the fatigue and inertia in Washington's policies toward what it considers the most dangerous region of the world without this gloomy preamble.

The other day, following his uninspiring speech to the nation after Standard and Poor's downgrading of U.S. bond ratings, President Obama took a helicopter up to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware to pay his respects to the 30 U.S. special forces soldiers who had been shot down over Afghanistan. These casualties were the largest one-day loss in ten years of war. Bin Laden has been revenged. Afghanistan is now fully Obama's war, but getting out with dignity is proving much more difficult than going in. Meanwhile, officials and experts are expressing growing alarm over the political meltdown in Pakistan—accelerated by the military's humiliation over the U.S. operation against Bin Laden.

As for America's other war of choice in Iraq, the U.S. cannot quite figure out whether to go or stay. Every day Iran extends its influence in the country the U.S. once believed was a bulwark against Teheran's regional designs. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's government, rife with corruption and inefficiency, still lacks the legitimacy to stand alone without continuing American military support. Kurdish-Arab tensions remain high, and now Muqtada al-Sadr has reemerged, calling upon his followers to kill any remaining American soldiers.

The public is fed up with these costly involvements in Afghanistan and Iraq—but isn't it lucky that Washington can easily afford them thanks to our robust economy?

Then there is the so-called "Arab spring." In a speech last June Obama declared that America was going to get on "the right side of history" by supporting the popular uprisings across the Arab world instead of propping up dictators in hopes of containing Islamist radicalism. The U.S. moved fairly quickly to abandon its "friends"—Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt—in those apparently "easy" revolutions. But now it watches uneasily as the new regimes struggle to legitimize themselves against continuing popular protest.

The less "easy" and ongoing upheavals in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria pose more perplexing problems. In Libya, Obama has come around to "leading from behind" Sarkozy and Cameron, because the Congress and the

public are allergic to yet another American military adventure. Washington seems helpless to influence the chaotic situation in Yemen, where Al-Qa'ida and other anti-American elements are trying to fill the vacuum left by the injured and absent President Ali Abdullah Salih.

Bahrain has exposed American inconsistency most dramatically. Verbal scoldings over a particularly brutal crackdown could not convince Arab and Muslim opinion that Washington was not applying a double standard—hardly standing on “the right side of history.” The issue here was Saudi Arabia, which dispatched [troops to help crush the Bahrain popular protests](#). King Abdullah—already furious that Washington had “betrayed” Ben Ali and Mubarak—did not conceal his displeasure over American dithering on Bahrain.

The Syrian revolt poses the most serious challenge to Obama. Characteristically, he has been slow to call for regime change because the Asad regime, unpleasant as it is, has been a stabilizing element in the always volatile Arab-Israeli conflict zone. Washington and Tel Aviv both worry about the consequences of chaos as well as the behavior of a successor regime. Still, the temptation to help bring down Iran's key ally in the eastern Mediterranean as well as weaken Lebanon's Hizballah is strong, especially since the gross brutality of Asad's response to the protests so far has not stifled them. But America has little real leverage apart from verbal criticism, and Asad thus far shows no sign of being cowed by Washington.

Indeed, the U.S., which has dominated almost the entire Middle East for decades, seems now to be a mere bystander to the historic upheavals shaking the region. Despite its pervasive military presence from the Mediterranean to the Gulf, America lacks the respect that otherwise might give its words more weight.

Perhaps the primary cause of America's declining influence is its stance on the Arab-Israeli conflict. If the U.S. was really serious about getting on “the right side of history” in the Middle East, it would have long since adopted a balanced and proactive stance. Let us say it frankly: this would mean putting tangible pressure on Israel to adhere to the international consensus—land for peace, based on the 1967 lines, in the framework of the 1967 U.N. Security Council Resolution 242. “Pathetic” does not adequately describe Obama's position on this matter. (In fairness, several of his predecessors were almost equally supine.)

Does Palestine still matter? It probably will matter even more as populist upheavals reshape the political landscape in the Arab world, [as others have observed](#). Next month the Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas plans to request the U.N. General Assembly to recognize a Palestinian state. Such a decision requires Security Council approval, and the U.S. undoubtedly will veto the measure. “Voting against the Palestinian state would be a historic, deadly mistake in the record of U.S. President Barack Obama, in whom there was hope for change,” said Marwan Barghouti, perhaps the most popular of Palestinian leaders, [from his prison cell in Israel recently](#). “Such a veto will be confronted by millions-strong protests throughout the Arab and Muslim world, indeed throughout the whole world.”

Even if he were not overwhelmed by his domestic woes, Obama would find it difficult indeed to exert bold leadership on the Palestinian-Israeli issue. Even if he wanted to make the balanced course correction that so many favor, he finds himself hamstrung. His inner circle is too resistant, too close to Israeli interests. And a powerful coalition of the Israel lobby, Christian fundamentalists, “Tea Party” Republicans and policy hawks are calling for much tougher U.S. policies toward Iran and Syria. A [recent puff piece on Hillary Clinton in Vanity Fair](#) comments approvingly: “And ever since Obama bollixed up his relations with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in 2010, Hillary has worked overtime to soothe Bibi.”

And as Congress adjourns for its summer vacation 81 Congressmen, about a fifth of the House of Representatives, are heading to Israel to do some “fact finding” courtesy of an Israeli foundation linked to the Israel lobby (AIPAC) in Washington. As reported by [Al Kamen in The Washington Post](#), “unlike a proper

congressional trip, we're told that the AIPAC foundation 'runs [the members] pretty good.'" What better preparation for the 2012 elections?

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