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The Dispensable Nation

The people of the Middle East don't want the leadership that President Obama offered them on Thursday.

BY FLYNT LEVERETT, HILLARY MANN LEVERETT | MAY 20, 2011

President Barack Obama's State Department address on the Middle East was a desperate attempt to define a new narrative about the Arab awakening and America's role in this critical region. But the speech only confirmed that Obama has no alternative strategic vision to replace the neoconservative fantasies of his predecessor. In the process, the president demonstrated that the United States has little to offer the region and its people.

Obama spoke at what is, in fact, a moment of crisis for America's position in the Middle East. In her introductory remarks, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that "America's leadership is more essential than ever" in the Middle East. The president himself claimed that America's pursuit of its interests was not at odds with the aspirations of the region's people, but rather essential to the fulfillment of those aspirations.

Sorry, but the people of the region disagree. Earlier this week, **Pew Research released a poll** of key Middle Eastern populations conducted in late March and early April -- a period that includes many of the major elements of the Arab Awakening to date (the changes of regime in Tunisia and Egypt, the U.S./NATO military intervention in Libya, Saudi intervention in Bahrain, and the outbreak of unrest in Syria). The poll shows continued anger and resentment over U.S. policy and toward Obama, himself. The results are in keeping with the most recent running of the annual Arab Public Opinion Survey, which showed that Obama is now even less popular than President George W. Bush at the end of his tenure. Today, it is not even clear that Obama would be able to give a

speech about America's approach to the Middle East in a major regional capital, as he did with his 2009 speeches in Istanbul and Cairo.

Beyond public opinion, the region's major strategic actors -- the Islamic Republic of Iran, of course, but also post-Saddam Iraq, Turkey, post-Mubarak Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel -- are increasingly charting their own strategic courses. More and more, they see the United States as poorly intentioned, incompetent, and less relevant to their interests; as a result, they are ever more prepared to take major decisions and initiatives without deference to American preferences.

This was manifested recently in Saudi Arabia's invasion of Bahrain-- Manama's "invitation" notwithstanding, Saudi Arabia's military intervention was clearly against the preferences of a majority of Bahrainis -- and Egypt's decisions to upgrade relations with Iran and cease its cooperation with Israel in keeping Gaza under siege. Immediately after Obama spoke, the trend was extended when Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu rejected as "indefensible" the president's proposal that Israeli-Palestinian borders be negotiated on the basis of the 1967 map.

Obama's wan rhetoric about the Palestinian issue -- recycling a formula on final borders that was first introduced into presidential rhetoric 10 years ago by Bill Clinton, while ostentatiously punting on Jerusalem and refugees -- highlights the utter lack of strategic vision and creativity in the administration's approach. The same can be said of his rhetoric about Hamas and other Islamist groups. It is now absolutely imperative for the United States to revamp its posture toward Islamist movements in the Middle East, including Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah, as well as Hamas. By continuing the same dysfunctional approach as his predecessors -- demanding, up front, that these groups recognize Israel's right to exist and disarm before negotiations and surrender everything else that makes them distinctive as political actors-- Obama is not isolating the Islamists. He is only deepening America's isolation from some of the most vital political forces in the Middle East today, whose leaders have precisely the kind of democratic legitimacy the president claims to want to encourage.

The president's rejection of serious engagement was even more stark with regard to the Islamic Republic. We have argued, from early in Obama's presidential tenure, that he was never serious about productive engagement, much less "Nixon to China" rapprochement, with Tehran. But in his speech, Obama dropped even a façade of interest in negotiations with Iran.

Obama depicts the Islamic Republic as the antithesis of the Arab Awakening. It is certainly the case that there is no significant constituency outside the Islamic Republic for replicating precisely its form of government. But, however much the U.S. president and his administration try to deny it, the Islamic Republic is, in broad terms, a prototype of the sort of political order that other Middle Eastern populations want to create for themselves -- orders that may be imperfect, but which will be indigenously authentic, highly competitive, and not subordinated to an overbearing American hegemon (as with Mubarak's Egypt) or any other external power.

The fact is that any political order in the Middle East which becomes at all more representative of its people's values, beliefs, and positions will, by definition, become less enthusiastic about strategic cooperation with America. (That's why Tehran thinks it is "winning" relative to the United States as the Arab Awakening unfolds.) But, rather than face this reality and take on the real challenge of thinking through how the United States pursues its interests in the Middle East in ways that don't offend most of the people who live there, Obama resorts to rhetoric and policies that have already manifestly failed.

In this context, few in the region are likely to be fooled by Obama's promotion of U.S.-sponsored economic development as the solution to many of the Middle East's most pressing problems. This tactic has been deployed, futilely, for years to assuage Palestinian despair over life under open-ended, U.S.-facilitated occupation and "explain away" the fundamentally political roots of anti-Israeli and anti-U.S. violence in the region. To add to the disingenuousness of this part of the president's speech, most of the money ostensibly allocated as economic support to fledgling democracies in the Middle East is not new funding. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has become the single largest source of economic assistance and investment for Egypt -- but the kingdom warranted hardly a mention in the president's speech.

The Middle East is changing, and American policy toward the region needs to change, too. Unfortunately, Obama hasn't fulfilled his repeated promises to improve on George W. Bush's disastrous foreign policy. Instead, he may end up presiding over an even more precipitous decline in America's regional standing and influence than his predecessor.

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