

Obama Foreign Policy: Too Little and Too Late

Now is the autumn of American political discontent and confusion over foreign policy. Winston Churchill once called Russia a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. His quip may well apply to current American policy.

Is the United States serious in the fight against Islamist terrorism? President Barack Obama has repeatedly stated he would not order U.S. ground troops to fight in Syria, But on October 30, 2015 he decided to send a small number, less than 50, Special Operations troops to the Kurdish-controlled territory in northern Syria to help the local forces fight against the Islamic State (ISIS).

According to the Obama administration, this small incremental change in policy will not mean that the U.S. is engaged in a combat role, but simply will offer advice and assistance to local forces fighting ISIS. Whether true or not, the change is not an implementation of the original Obama rhetoric to degrade and destroy ISIS. Rather, it is a belated response to the Russian initiative on September 30, 2015 to intervene to support the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and to attack the ISIS forces.

No one can doubt the difficulty of deciding on policy, on reaching a cease-fire, or another solution to the bloody war in Syria, now in its fifth year, or the contentiousness of differences over the fate of Assad in any political transition. Yet the fundamental reality is that while Russia has been active in Syria with deployment of ground attack aircraft and anti-aircraft missile batteries, American policy has been one of timidity and avoiding risk. Only in late October 2015 did Secretary of Defense Ash Carter say he was prepared to put more American forces in harm's way.

On Syria, Obama made an official statement on August 18, 2011, "The time has come for President Assad to step aside." But instead of supporting the rebel call in 2011 for a change in the Syrian regime, the U.S. policy was one of political and military retreat, even refusing to intervene in Syria after the "red line," the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, had been crossed. Proposals for an effective policy to deal with the Syrian problem and indeed other problems affecting U.S. national interest have mainly come not from the White House or State Department, but from the Pentagon. U.S. weakness and indecision about policy regarding Syria left the door open for Russian intervention.

The kindest comment on American policy is that it has lacked a comprehensive strategy for Syria, Iraq, and the Middle East as a whole. The Middle East is a perplexing and problematic area with its instability and conflicting and changing elements. Sectarian tensions, failed Arab states, the Islamic State, the continuing terrorist violence and civil wars, the millions of refugees and migrants, the struggle for influence between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Palestinian Narrative of Victimhood, the question of whether President Assad is the problem or the solution, make decisions on policy difficult.

Not surprisingly, Obama's foreign policy towards these issues has lacked consistency or effectiveness. That policy may not be isolationist or a form of appeasement since it did include training Iraqi forces that unfortunately failed. But it is essentially one of non-intervention by ground forces except for a small number of Special Operations Forces, as well as the use of drones.

A major perplexing issue is that U.S. actions do not follow from the Obama rhetoric, or may even be contradictory. This can be interpreted either as deliberate caution, or irresolute or changing priorities. In December 18, 2011 Obama announced the U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq. Today, with the Islamic State (ISIS) prominent in that country this cannot be

considered success. On the contrary, on June 10, 2015 the U.S. announced the presence of 3500 troops in Iraq and plans to supply funding to the Iraqi army to help deal with ISIS. But the U.S. administration failed, at least until very recently, to consider ISIS first in Iraq and then in Syria, as the main problem or take any serious action against it.

On June 4, 2009 President Obama spoke in Cairo of a "New Departure" in U.S. relations with the world of Arab Muslims in the Middle East. His main self-proclaimed triumph in the area is the killing on May 2, 2011, of Osama bin Laden, which gained general approval in the U.S.

However, the administration takes credit for a number of other policies, regarding Libya, Iraq, and Iran. In Libya, the U.S. did join the international effort to depose Muammar Gaddafi who was killed on October 20, 2011, but disassociated itself from any effort to resolve the political confusion in the country, and of course was humiliated by the Benghazi terrorist attack on September 11, 2012 on the U.S. diplomatic compound that killed four Americans.

The most controversial Obama policy is the nuclear deal with Iran, signed on July 14, 2015, which has been disapproved by a majority of citizens as well as by the U.S. Senate along with Middle East countries. The sanguine expectation was not only halting or delaying production of an Iranian nuclear weapon, but also a more conciliatory relation between the U.S. and Iran.

Great expectations are unlikely to be fulfilled and policy problems have resulted for at least three reasons. While the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei remains in office such reconciliation is improbable. A second issue is that the Sunni Arab states, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar all seek American protection against Iran, promised but difficult to deliver on the basis of Obama's non-interventionist policy. In Bahrain, the future of the naval

base of the U.S. Fifth Fleet is uncertain. The Saudis disagree with the U.S. on the situation in Syria. The sale of military planes to the UAE has been held up and no aid has been given the UAE since 2011.

Most troublesome as a result of the Iran deal is the tension if not friction between the U.S. and Israel. The most recent example was the instruction to Secretary John Kerry and Samantha Power to boycott the speech on October 1, 2015 of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the UN General Assembly.

In 2011 Obama approved the Tunisians for overthrowing the regime of President Zine ben Ali, but also approved, or did not oppose, the fall of President Mubarak in Egypt. The U.S. also approved the coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and was critical of its overthrow by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, now President of the country. It has been critical of the violations of human rights by the Egyptian regime and has termed it repressive and autocratic.

Nevertheless, Obama agreed in March 2015 to lift the executive holds he had placed in October 2013 on the delivery of arms to Egypt. The U.S. will send 12 F-16s, 20 missiles, and 125 tank kits to Cairo, and the administration will continue to request annual military aid of \$1.3 billion. It was not coincidental that Egypt had already signed large arms agreements with France, \$5.5 billion, and with Russia, \$3.5 billion.

What then is the Obama policy? He clearly want to get U.S. forces out of Iraq, to avoid any American casualties in Syria and elsewhere, and to veer U.S. policy and concern towards the Pacific and the Far East, but is puzzled by what to do about Syria, and policy towards other Arab countries and Israel.

In the words of John Boehner before leaving his position as Speaker of the House of Representatives it was necessary to "clean up the barn a little bit." American foreign policy needs clarity and conviction in cleaning up the international

barn.

First published in the