OBAMA’S POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A STRATEGY OF SELECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

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**Obama’s Policy in the Middle East: A Strategy of Selective Engagement**   
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The Old Testament tells us that at the beginning the universe was full of “chaos and tumult” (toho wa bohu). The Middle East seems to be reverting to that Biblical era. In reality, turmoil and instability in the Middle East are not new; they have been dominant characteristics of the region since the end of World War II. In recent years, Iraq has continued to unravel, the Syrian war continues with excessive violence, Egypt is on the brink of civil war, and Lebanon is facing a multi-dimensional threat[[1]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn1" \o ").

There have been three great shocks to the Middle East during the last decade: the invasion of Iraq, the Iranian drive towards a nuclear bomb, and the ‘Arab Spring’. The previous US Administrations have faced or waged wars in the Middle East; they have faced upheavals and the change of regimes, including those who served as strategic pillars of regional stability; they have faced the rise of terrorist activities; and they have faced threats of non-access to oil[[2]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn2" \o "). Now, the most imminent danger is nuclear proliferation. However, none of the former US Administrations have had to face all these uncertainties and threats at same time.

President Obama is not very fortunate considering that he confronts, besides all the traditional uncertainties in the broader Middle East, the fallout of all three major shocks the region has experienced during the past decade.

‘Candidate’ Obama had said he would engage the Arab and Muslim world without any threat of attacking it. He would work to change the perception of the Muslim and Arab peoples of the United States. He would show leadership through dialogue and diplomacy and not through threat of war. Such leadership was due to nurture economic and political ties rooted in regional and international institutions that would bring order and stability to this chaotic region.

The Obama and his national security team had a grand strategy for the Middle East, probably well-intentioned, and carefully crafted – but it was not consistently pursued. The plan was simple and elegant; unfortunately, however, it has failed[[3]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn3" \o ").

President Obama has hoped that the success of his new grand strategy to end the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan waged by the Bush Administration would demonstrate once and for all that liberal Democrats were capable of leading the world through diplomacy rather than with military force. By doing that, he would be responding to the public unhappiness and distrust of the Bush foreign policy which left America in great trouble. To some people, it’s much too early to anticipate History’s verdict on the Obama Administration’s grand strategy[[4]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn4" \o "). The current President has three more years left in his second term, and the course of events in the Middle East could change drastically within that time.

This paper seeks to evaluate the success and failure of Obama’s ‘grand strategy’ in the Middle East, if he had ever really adopted one. Nevertheless, it will try to determine under what conditions the United States President can implement his grand plans given the nature of domestic, regional, and international opportunities and constraints, and what the implications of doing that are for the US standing and interests. To be fair in the analysis which will be undertaken in evaluating the Obama evolving doctrine on foreign policy, this paper will use the methodology of comparing the performances of the George W. Bush and Barak H. Obama presidencies in foreign policy towards the Middle East. In doing so, this study seeks to ascertain whether Obama succeeded in implementing a ‘grand strategy’ in the Middle East during the first term and part of the second term of his presidency. On the other hand, this paper will address the question of how well, in the face of opportunities and constraints, the President managed the various crises that have erupted in the Middle East and what the implications were for the United States and its allies. For this matter, the study will cover the performances of the US strategy vis-a-vis the Arab Spring, the intervention in Libya, the policy towards Egypt, the US inaction in Syria, and the reaching of an interim agreement with Iran on the nuclear program, and it will look over the consequences of that on the US relations with Saudi Arabia and Israel.

**US ‘Grand Strategy’**

The term ‘grand strategy’ came into existence when military strategist Basil Liddell Hart and historian Edward Mead Earle reasoned, “States need strategies, not just during wars, but also in peace time”. They claimed that through having such a strategy, “A state might prevent wars from breaking out and prevail in any that did”. Other scholars and government officials define ‘grand strategy’ differently: “The big idea of foreign and national security policy – the overarching concept that links ends, ways and means, the organizing principle that allows states to plan and prioritize the use of all instruments of national power – diplomatic, economic, cultural, and military”[[5]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn5" \o "). Consequently, a grand strategy for the United States towards the Middle East cannot just be a list of policy aspirations or priorities; it must consist of a “clear articulation of national interests backed by a set of operational plans for advancing them”. Such a strategy must be conceived and put forward by the US President.

Overall, successful ‘grand strategy’ requires the following: (1) a clear, simple, easily implemented idea based on the president’s beliefs; (2) a permissive domestic environment rooted in presidential popularity, leadership, and partisan support; and (3) international leadership rather than reaction[[6]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn6" \o "). Examining the George W. Bush presidency will represent a successful attempt to provide an ideal case study of the conditions that make it possible for a president to design a grand strategy and implement it – even if it wasn’t a good one. Observers refer to Bush’s success as part of his management style and his relationship with the US establishment. When Bush entered the White House, he did not have a grand strategy. Prior to the September 11 attacks, he possessed a worldview and a set of beliefs about the international system. His ‘grand strategy’ came as a direct product of these attacks, and it was based on the principles of American primacy and capability to conduct a pre-emptive war[[7]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn7" \o "). The implementation of the newly born strategy stemmed directly from global realities created by the attacks and was facilitated by his direct management style by which he privileged those advisors whose policy preferences aligned closely with his over those whose preferences did not. The divide among his foreign policy advisors was mitigated by his management style. It should also be noted that Bush’s performance at the systematic level was equally strong. His Presidency was defined by action, not reaction. In the aftermath of the attacks, he passed sweeping counter-terrorism legislation and ordered the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as a part of his global war on terror. Bush set forth a coherent ‘grand strategy’ based on a simplified view of the world and the role of the United States in it. He had benefited in carrying out such a strategy from a highly permissive domestic and international environment and a healthy US economy[[8]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn8" \o "). However, Bush’s grand strategy and its implementation do not mean it was necessarily good for the US world standing. The long wars that Bush initiated in Afghanistan and Iraq damaged the US global standing and were highly costly economically as well as in human lives.

President Obama faced a mixed array of opportunities and constraints rather than primarily hurtful or helpful factors as in the case of President W. Bush, but as the US military intervened in Libya a fierce debate erupted in the United States over the possible existence of an Obama doctrine. The attack on Libya contradicted the doctrine of engagement which was declared as the principal platform of his foreign policy which was announced during his presidential campaign with a promise of engaging other nations and ending the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan[[9]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn9" \o "). After the military intervention in Libya, many columnists and observers bemoaned the United States strategic incompetence. The columnist Jackson Diehl wrote in the Washington Post, “This Administration is notable for its lack of grand strategy…or strategists”. In January 2011, John Mearsheimer concluded in National Interests, “The root cause of America’s troubles is that it adopted a flawed grand strategy after the cold war”[[10]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn10" \o "). The economic historian Niall Ferguson argued in the Newsweek that US setbacks in the Middle East were “the predictable consequence of the Obama Administration’s lack of any kind of a coherent grand strategy, a deficit about which more than a few veterans of US foreign policymaking have long worried”. Some of the Administrations defenders like Michael Hirsh argued, “The real Obama doctrine is to have no doctrine at all. And that’s the way it’s likely to remain”[[11]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn11" \o "). Hirsh meant it to be a compliment.

In reality, Obama faced tensions at the domestic level with a stalled Congress and a rapidly deteriorating public support and a struggling economy. The combination of these factors hindered his attempts to implement a grand strategy, with Congress and the economy posing the most serious threat to his attempt. At the same time, he was faced with great international challenges including the inherited legacy of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of China, and the Arab Spring uprisings. In each of these cases, Obama employed a deliberate decision making process and formalistic management style to address the challenges at hand, calling for the help of allies and United Nations institutions[[12]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn12" \o "). In some cases, Obama adopted a controversial unconventional decision that went against the recommendations of his foreign policy advisors. For instance, he decided on a thirty thousand troop surge in Afghanistan with the eventual goal of winding down the war while he sat idle in response to Arab uprisings in Egypt and Syria in what was called “leadership from behind”.

This comparison demonstrates that if a president is a strong and effective leader with a clear strategy in mind, conditions domestically are favorable, and his strategy aligns with regional and international realities – then he can put a grand strategy in place. Interestingly, this analysis leads one to the fact that grand strategies are not as important as some people think. History has left us with many lessons where grand strategies were carried out with shortsighted operational plans for achieving them, leading to serious failures.

**Obama’s Engagement Policy**

For Mr. Obama, the shift to diplomacy fulfills a campaign pledge he had made in 2008 saying he would stretch out a hand to America’s enemies and speak to any foreign leader without pre-conditions. Obama knows that such a shift from military force to diplomacy will subject him to considerable political risk, especially when the policy goes to cover relations with Iran and Syria. By resorting to diplomacy, Obama wanted a definitive end of the post-September 11 world dominated by two major wars and an endless battle against Islamic terrorism that keeps predator drones flying over Pakistan and Yemen[[13]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn13" \o ").

The shift to diplomacy reflects the scaling back of the use of American power, not least in the Middle East, as well as accepting to deal with foreign governments as they are rather than pushing for regime change.

Obama is fully aware that diplomacy is a protracted process with often inconclusive outcomes. He also knows it is harder to rally the American public behind a multilateral negotiation than a missile strike against an enemy.

White House officials suggest that Obama had planned since 2009 to make this shift and that everything that came before it from the troop surge in Afghanistan to the raid that killed Osama bin Laden were cleaning up after his predecessor. In 2009, the United States had 180,000 troops engaged in two wars, and the Obama priority was winding down those wars. He had shifted foreign policy from a very military face to a very diplomatic face[[14]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn14" \o ").

Much of this diplomatic endeavor has been on display in the travels executed by Secretary of State John Kerry, who in addition to his work on Iran and on Syria, was able to re-activate the peace negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Kerry spent greater efforts negotiating the destruction of the Syrian chemical weapons stockpiles, sealing a nuclear deal with Iran, and preparing the ground for a Syrian conference in Geneva. It should be noted, however, that Mr. Obama has called for Mr. Assad to step down, but his diplomatic efforts on Syria have done very little to bring down Assad or to sustain the Syrian military opposition against a dug-in regime. Similarly, Obama’s engagement policy with Iran does not fully serve US interests with most of the Middle Eastern countries. A broader engagement with Iran, one that could make it a cooperative partner on regional issues, seems to be far off. Obama, who has sought to refocus American policy on Asia, made a significant confession by returning to the Middle East and making it a major preoccupation for the rest of his second term and probably that of his successor. Despite a war-weary public and a declining US reliance on Middle Eastern oil, Washington would continue to be an active player in the region. However, America should not insist only on defending its own interests in the Middle East, but also on trying to resolve sectarian conflicts in countries like Iraq, Syria, and Bahrain, and, if necessary, on intervening militarily to stop humanitarian tragedies.

**Obama and the Arab Spring**

The Arab Spring presented the United States with a historic opportunity to take a clear stand on the side of freedom and democracy and strengthen its own standing in the region. Incredibly, the Obama Administration adopted a very timid and cautious attitude. Such an attitude made America look weaker, less influential, and less trusted by all the Arabs – foes and allies alike.

Due to the George W. Bush Administration’s Mid-East policy which really was no policy other than ‘war by every means,’ American legitimacy and credibility were bankrupt because of the distorted vision of the president. However, Condoleeza Rice, Bush’s Secretary of State, admitted in a speech that she delivered in 2005 what Obama had yet to do, “For sixty years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region, here in the Middle East, and we achieved neither.” Condoleeza Rice again invoked this matter in her memoir No Higher Honor.

Since the beginning of this historic year the people of the Arab world have challenged the autocratic order in at least a half dozen states. Some have fallen; others teeter; a few have regained their balance. Still others have not yet faced the unrest, but brace for the day that will undoubtedly come. The desire for freedom will persist until it’s secured[[15]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn15" \o ").

Ms. Rice has tried to make a comparison between the American people insisting on the universality of the rights to freedom and democracy and the Arab people calling for these same rights, concluding that America cannot be neutral in the struggle between freedom and tyranny.

The most astonishing part is that the Arab Spring was launched by the younger generations and progressive idealists whose objective was to reshape their futures by overthrowing dictators and bringing in new democratic governments.  
The uprisings in Egypt, in Tunisia, and the Arab peninsula targeted strong American allies. America should have made a much stronger case for democracy. The uprisings happened under Obama who traveled to Cairo a few months before to deliver his landmark speech vowing to end “the cycle of suspicion and discord between Americans and Muslims” affirming his belief that all people yearn for freedom, democracy, and justice.

When the Arab people took to the streets, Obama’s ideals crashed into the hurdles of geopolitical realities and domestic political constraints. Obama put his political interests before the principles of freedom and democracy and fairness.

In his speech on May 19, 2011, on the Middle East and the Arab Spring, Obama did not have clarity of vision for his administration regarding what was happening in the Middle East. It was filled with contradictions and hollow presumptions. It was not a landmark speech. Obama was still speaking as if America could make much of a difference in the region[[16]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn16" \o "). The events of that year have shown to what extent American influence has shrunk and how compromised America’s moral and political standings continue to be.

As a matter of fact, Obama continued to be a flip-flopper dealing with Arab revolutions[[17]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn17" \o "). He started another war against Libya because Qaddafi turned his tanks against his own people, but turned a blind eye towards what was happening in Syria and Bahrain. Obama was satisfied by imposing a few sanctions on Syria, and he kept welcoming the Bahraini king and officials despite all the atrocities committed against the Bahraini demonstrators.

Arabs and Muslims briefly imagined Barak H. Obama to be different from his predecessor. He’s been an improvement, but improving from’ catastrophic’ to ‘dismal’ isn’t much of an improvement. There has not been a word said about all regressive, corrupt, tyranny in many other Arab states that are no less illegitimate than Libya.

The Obama Administration kept quiet about the back-sliding of Egypt. The country is ruled by the military with on-going arbitrary arrests, military trials, torture, censorship and humiliation.

Earlier, Obama and important advisors had hoped to install the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and throughout the Middle East. Billions of dollars from the Obama Administration to the Muslim Brotherhood helped to bring Mohammad Morsi to the presidency. In reality, Morsi did not have an economic vision of his own, and he was a continuation of past economic policies under Hosni Mubarak that meant the vast majority of Egyptians was soon to lose trust in Morsi and Obama. In fact, Obama closed his eyes to the shortsighted policies adopted by the Muslim Brotherhood because he knew he was on the wrong side of history. The people of Egypt refused to be beholden to the wishes of Obama and the Muslim Brotherhood. Egyptians knew fully well that America only cares about protecting Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Given this reality, the Egyptians decided to take the matter again into their own hands and to overthrow Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood regime.

It is clear that Obama is now involved in face-saving knowing that the current changes in Egypt were not part of the White House script. Of course, the next few weeks and months are fraught with danger because events can always change unexpectedly.

**Egypt - Obama’s Headache**

The United States needs to pay a lot of attention to what is happening in Egypt. This warning is not particularly new. Washington has taken Egypt for granted for many years when Sadat and Mubarak were the rulers. Washington can no longer do that under the present transformation the country is undergoing. It is very hard to guess where it is all going to end, but the US-Egyptian relationship remains as a cornerstone for US policy in the region. When the Muslim Brotherhood won the elections, Washington tried hard to work with a government that had been elected by the people. Obama was accused of going too far in cooperating with the Muslim Brotherhood and ignoring some of the fundamental principles of democracy and the interests of other Egyptian groups opposed to the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Washington probably had no other choice than working with the Cairo government, but it didn’t have to ignore Morsi’s attempts to push away from democratic principles undermining freedoms and changing the character of the Egyptian society. The Brotherhood’s vision was deeply offensive to supporters of women’s rights, legal protection for minorities, free media, and respect for the rights of the opposition[[18]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn18" \o ").

When the Egyptian government went after the civil society, arresting and convicting forty-three members of non-governmental organizations to include sixteen Americans, the US kept its voice low. At a later time, Secretary of State John Kerry took a stand to defend those workers and the democratic process by waving the human rights pre-conditions of US aid to Egypt[[19]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn19" \o "). In fact, the Obama Administration has to think of new ways for dealing with a new Egyptian leadership. Egypt remains important for regional stability, and it is also geo-strategically important for the United States.

American diplomacy should be aware of the complexities of the actual transition in Egypt from the Muslim Brotherhood rule towards a new system shaped by a greater influence exercised by the military. It seems that future Egyptian government will listen less to the United States[[20]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn20" \o ").

Reports coming from Washington relate that there is tension between the White House Staff and the State Department. The news spilt over lately when the National Security Advisor Susan Rice laid out her critical appraisal of the Egyptian government which contradicted the Secretary of State John Kerry’s assessment that Egypt was “on the path to democracy”. This discrepancy reflects the great rift that has been simmering behind the scenes for several months and illustrates the divergent Egypt policies pursued at the White House and the State Department.

Such a rift among the national policy players is not new in American administrations, but what is strange is that the President is not taking any role to solve the situation. Officials and experts see that the Administration’s policy towards Egypt is hampered, not only by internal tensions, but also by being ad hoc and reactive without a long term strategy approved by President Obama. The same could be said of the President’s entire policy to the Middle East region[[21]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn21" \o ").

**Syria, Obama’s Nightmare?**

Syria is melting down as a state and as a nation. The crisis in Syria was led to the killing of over 150,000 people and displaced half of the Syrian population. The real danger is that the country could end up looking more like Somalia where the civil war has torn apart the state and divided the country[[22]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn22" \o "). Syria effectively is on the way to being fractured into several non-contiguous areas, most of which may fall under Islamist or terrorist control. The Kurdish North is already seeking autonomy under the leadership of the Kurdish Union Democratic Party. Andrew J. Tabler in an essay in Foreign Affairs published in July/August 2013 warned of a situation in which Syria shifts from a mostly contained humanitarian catastrophe to a strategic disaster for the United States and its regional allies. A country in the heart of a region that has 65% of the world’s oil reserves and 40% of its natural gas is becoming a lawless haven for terrorists. The question is not whether the Obama Administration will intervene to resolve this conflict but when, how, with what means, and at what cost[[23]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn23" \o "). Obama should know that the Las Vegas rules do not apply to Syria: what happens there will not stay there. The massive refugee crisis and the fallout of the war will threaten the security of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and Turkey. Obama should know the longer the conflict lasts, the greater the threat it poses will be and the harder it will become to do anything about it.

To stop Syria’s meltdown and to contain these threats, Obama needs a new approach including a partial military action aimed at convincing all sides to go to the Geneva Conference, but Obama does not seem to be doing any of that. Anthony Cordesman has said in an article that the instruction manual President Obama has read on what to do in Syria seems to follow Samuel Becket’s play “Waiting for Godot”. He has transformed calls for immediate action into a waiting game where it is not clear for what he or the US is waiting. After three years the US still has no clear strategy for dealing with the Syrian civil war. The US limited humanitarian aid and military assistance may come to border on tragicomedi[[24]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn24" \o ").

The Syrian civil war has escalated in ways that pose a growing strategic threat to the United States’ interests and its allies. Most significantly, it has strengthened Iran’s role in Syria, in Iraq, and in Lebanon. If Assad wins this war, he will be far more dependent for his security on Iran, Hezbollah, and the Iraqi Shiites militias[[25]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn25" \o ").

John Kerry, the Secretary of State, seems to be very enthusiastic about a negotiated settlement with Syria by calling for a Geneva conference along with the UN Secretary General and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov. Iran’s participation in the conference is becoming almost certain. The presence of Iran at the conference may turn into a problem rather than a solution. Some of the Syrian opposition factions accuse Iran of being an occupier of Syria. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has previously declined to attend the conference if Iran is invited. Kerry should know that for the Assad regime, negotiating the sharing of power could only happen when it feels that its ultimate hold on power is threatened. Right now, President Assad, with Russia providing arms and ammunition and the Iranian Quds Force along with Hezbollah fighting his battles, believes he is on the verge of winning the war. Under these conditions, there can be no negotiated settlement in Geneva, and the process undertaken by Kerry is marginalizing the opposition. After receiving inadequate support from the United States and taking a hard beating on the ground, the FSA (Free Syrian Army) was right to decline attending a Geneva conference. If the FSA acquiesced, it would be discredited and more Syrians would choose to fight under the Jihadist banner.

Under the present conditions and with the continuation of attacks by the Syrian Army along with Hezbollah, an outside intervention is needed to make a difference on the ground. Such a possibility is non-existent as long as the United States is unable or unwilling to lead it.

The Obama Administration should reassess its strategy towards Syria and provide the opposition with the necessary weapons and training to enable it to correct the balance of force on the ground. The timing of the Geneva talks would depend solely on such developments[[26]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn26" \o "). At the same time, the United States should continue to work with the Russians to forge a common vision for the transition and an understanding of how to get to that point before forcing the opposition to go to Geneva. Without raising the costs for the Syrian regime with a clear show of US support for the opposition, there is no way to persuade Assad and his sponsors in Teheran and Moscow to play constructive roles in the conflict’s end game[[27]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn27" \o ").

**US-Saudi Clash of Interests**

So much in the Middle East depends on Saudi Arabia’s stability, including the Gulf countries’ security as well as the prospects for a steady oil supply and reasonable energy prices. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries have pursued for half a century policies that align closely with the US strategy in the region, but these are troubling and uncertain times with likelihood for Saudi Arabia to clash with US interests. It’s in the Gulf’s geo-strategic landscape that the sharpest breaks between Saudi and US views are emerging. Regional tensions and the rise of sectarianism have been adding up to the disparity of their views[[28]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn28" \o ").

The more the region around Saudi Arabia falls into chaos, the less the Kingdom will be willing or able to act as a pillar of American strategy. Several events brought the Saudis to question the commitment and reliability of their strategic relations with the United States. Washington’s support of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt and the use of chemical weapons in Syria elicited from Riyadh anger and accusations of US unreliability and even betrayal[[29]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn29" \o "). These events were followed by the engagement of the US with Iran which has developed from the unprecedented phone call between President Obama and the Iranian President Rouhani. That initial contact brought to the fore a US-Iranian breakthrough that facilitated the signing of the interim nuclear agreement. All of these events have brought the Saudis to believe that the Kingdom needs to adopt a unilateral and more muscular policy to safeguard its own security and interests. It was really felt by the Saudi officials that something should be done to compensate for an apparent US retreat from the region.

When the Egyptian military, led by General Abdel Fattah El Sisi, ousted Mohammad Morsi from the presidency, the US solicited the Saudis to help in imploring Sisi to reach a compromise with Morsi. The Saudis found themselves working at cross-purposes with Washington. Riyadh’s ultimate interest lay in the end of the Brotherhood government for political as well as ideological reasons. Saudi Arabia together with UAE and Kuwait started pouring billions of dollars into the Egyptian military regime. Having an unstable Egypt on top of the crises in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen would be too much for the Kingdom to bear. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia had a long-rooted relationship with the Egyptian military so the army was a natural partner. The Saudi aid was intended to pave the way for a resumption of Egypt’s regional role in opposing Iranian dominating influence in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. In the Saudi assessment, the Obama Administration is hesitant, undecided, and weak, and Saudi Arabia along with other Gulf countries cannot afford to wait while Washington vacillates.

When the Syrian chemical weapons attack occurred on August 21, 2013, the Saudis seemed relieved that Obama had finally decided to enforce his red line and launch a military strike. The Saudi officials were among the signatories of a statement at the G-20 Summit for military action against Syria. Saudi hopes were later dashed with the accord between Obama and Putin and the consequent UN Security Council resolution that demanded Assad to turn over Syria’s chemical weapons. The Saudi media found in that move a ploy to prolong the conflict and to insure the survival of Assad. The Saudis along with their regional allies saw that the deal would marginalize their role[[30]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn30" \o ").

Saudi Arabia’s displeasure over Syria’s deal was reflected in the cancellation of Prince Saud al-Faisal’s speech at the UN General Assembly[[31]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn31" \o ").

Then the prospect of a US-Iran rapprochement came which was perceived as a sign of American readiness to give the Iranian government more space to maneuver for influence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and leaving the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard with the ability to meddle in the Gulf countries. The Saudis’ interpretation of the US-Iranian rapprochement was that it was a catalyst to increase Teheran’s attempt to project power and break free from its isolation.

The breach became dramatic when Saudi Arabia announced its refusal to accept a seat on the United Nations Security Council, in what Prince Bandar bin-Sultan, the Intelligence Chief, described as “A message for the US, not the UN” according to the Wall Street Journal. Other Saudi officials voiced, “A high level of disappointment in the US government dealings on Syria and the Palestinian issue”[[32]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn32" \o "). The Obama Administration should really be worried that the Saudi views and concerns are shared by Egypt, Jordan, UAE, and Israel. These countries argue privately that Obama has shredded US influence by dumping his allies and embarking on negotiations with Iran without consulting with them[[33]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn33" \o ").

Now, as President Obama intends to pursue a permanent deal with Iran over its nuclear program, he should keep in mind that all of the US key allies in the region are in open revolt against his policies. Washington’s relationship with Riyadh may prove the hardest to patch up[[34]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn34" \o "). Saudi concerns about Iran relate to a whole range of actions seen by the Kingdom as a threat to their influence and even their grip on power at home. They see any realistic deal as American acquiescence to Teheran’s hegemonic drive in the region. The Saudis think the deal does not curb Iranian ambitions; it just takes the United States out of the regional security equation. Obama’s policies in the Middle East have increasingly irreconcilable priorities when it comes to Gulf security[[35]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn35" \o "). While Obama focuses on Iran’s nuclear program, the Saudis see potential threats and the arranging of other Iranian activities in several Arab countries in addition to Iran’s intent to use Shiite communities to stoke unrest in the GCC countries.

The threat of Iran destabilizing the governments of the GCC is no longer a top concern for Washington. Chas Freeman, a former US ambassador to Saudi Arabia, believes that the Saudi concerns go beyond the fear that Washington will no longer intend to contain Iran but may actually align itself with it again, thinking of the time more than thirty years previously when Iran was called the regional gendarme of the United States[[36]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn36" \o "). They are clearly afraid of returning to what they were under the Shah’s regime. Jon Alterman from the Center for Strategic and International Studies believes that a final agreement between the US and Iran may have to address issues like Iran’s support for Assad’s regime and Hezbollah. Such a broadening of the issue could give the Saudis a chance to voice their opinion about the future of the region.

Saudi Arabia may actually be spurred to pursue its own initiative towards forging better ties with Iran in the wake of Rouhani’s professed desire for better relations[[37]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn37" \o "). Despite the common assumption of rivalry based on sectarian and geopolitical differences, Riyadh and Teheran have always shown their intentions to temper sectarian tensions and to cooperate on shared interests. They both know that continuous confrontation harms their respective national interests and economies.

These worrisome trends in the US-Saudi relations are unlikely to seriously jeopardize the survival of Gulf regimes though they are creating a toxic political environment, and the Obama Administration must not lose sight of these realities.

**Historical Achievement – or Historical Mistake**

When the deal with Iran on its nuclear program was announced, Prime Minister Netanyahu labeled it as a “historical mistake”. The deal may cause the most serious risk in US-Israel relations in several decades. The growing divide comes from the fact that the two governments don’t see eye to eye on Iran’s nuclear activities[[38]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn38" \o "). Israel wants a complete dismantling of Iran’s capabilities, while the US wants an agreement which could ultimately stop Iran from getting enough material to make a bomb[[39]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn39" \o "). The impact on US­-Israeli relations, however, could be serious in case Netanyahu continues his condemnation of the deal and continues to work with Israel’s friends in the US Congress to torpedo it. Obama is aware of the risk and has taken steps to ratchet down the heat. For the Israeli side, the US policy in the Middle East and its engagement with Iran brings with it more costs than benefits.

In fact, the Iranian nuclear program has been slowed by the deal, but the process serves the Iranians as de facto international recognition of their right to enrich uranium; they have already made significant advances in the whole cycle of producing nuclear fuel.

The view from Israel is that the United States, preferring diplomacy over the use of massive military force, rushed to achieve the Geneva agreement and reached a compromise like the one it had achieved dealing with the Syrian chemical weapons issue[[40]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn40" \o ").

There is a large disparity between the US perception of the interim agreement and the reaction in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states have been worried not only by the American pullout from the region, but also by the rise of Iranian hegemony. These concerns have brought forward the option of a surprising alliance of interests between Israel and the Gulf states. Such an alliance will fall apart the moment Saudi Arabia moves to acquire nuclear technology of its own. Obama’s principal problem will remain in the lack of trust coming from friendly states doubting his ability to implement any commitment he makes.

**A Review of the Obama Doctrine**

Obama’s appointment of Susan Rice as his National Security Advisor is not likely to change the US foreign policy very much. The decision-making on foreign policy has always been made by the President himself, and all the choices have been already set. The most important second term appointments which may affect the course of foreign policy were the appointments of John Kerry as Secretary of State and Chuck Hagel as Secretary of Defense[[41]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn41" \o "). However, Ms. Rice, along with her aides, has been trying to set up a mid-course correction for the US policy in the Middle East. It is believed that Obama has adopted the priorities established through this review. Obama specified these priorities in his speech to the UN General Assembly; they would focus on negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran, mitigating the war in Syria, and brokering peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. On everything else the US would take a backseat. Obama made it clear that there were limits to nurturing democracy in Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Tunisia, or Yemen[[42]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn42" \o ").

The blueprint drawn at the White House is a model of pragmatism – avoiding the use of force except to respond to acts of aggression, disruption of oil supplies, terrorist networks, or weapons of mass destruction proliferation. The approach favored diplomacy to military engagement and raises doubts about whether the US would ever again use military force in the Middle East.

Critics of this pragmatic policy say that this view can’t make a decisive difference in what is going on in the region, but it will give to the Obama Administration the flexibility and time to tackle problems in other regions of the world.

In reality, the power vacuum in the Middle East is becoming obvious. There is no single great power remaining in the region. At the same time, the core of Arab power of politics is flat on its back and torn by political failures and societal divisions and is unable to play any meaningful role[[43]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement" \l "_ftn43" \o ").

**Conclusion**

It would be fair to say that the Obama Administration inherited a lot of problems from the Bush Administration’s grand strategy with the concept of “liberal hegemony” with the objective of obtaining American primacy and promoting democracy and containing rogue states and international terrorism. The Obama Administration has just been attempting to have a non-ideological foreign policy where strategies are tailored to specific problems. Such an approach does not constitute a grand strategy, but could possibly be termed as a “selective engagement”.

This does not mean, however, that American uni-polarity in the region has given way to a new balance of power. There is no rising power to grab the throne. Russia with its present diplomacy does not have the economic, military, or political means to fill the gap. China so far has shown no interest or ability in playing any role beyond securing energy supplies. The US engaging Iran will make the region look different, but not dramatically so. The new balance of power in the Middle East does not mean a rupture in the US-Saudi or US-Israel relations. The balance of power only works if the United States maintains strong relations with all the sides.

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**سياسة أوباما في الشرق الأوسط: استراتيجية الاشتباك الانتقائي**

ثلاث خضات كبيرة طبعت الشرق الأوسط خلال العقد الأخير: اجتياح العراق والتوجه الإيراني نحو صنع قنبلة نووية و"الربيع العربي". الإدارات الأميركية السابقة  واجهت الحروب أو شنتها في الشرق الأوسط وقد واجهت أيضاً الثورات وتغيير الأنظمة بما في ذلك الأنظمة التي كانت تخدم كأعمدة استراتيجية داعمة للاستقرار الإقليمي. وواجهت الإدارات الأميركية في الوقت نفسه تزايد الأعمال الإرهابية وواجهت تهديدات حرمانها من النفط. أما الآن فالخطر الأقرب هو خطر انتشار الأسلحة النووية. إلا أن أي من هذه الإدارات لم تضطر إلى مواجهة هذه الشكوك والتهديدات.  
وتسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تقييم نجاح "استراتيجية أوباما الكبرى" وفشلها في الشرق الأوسط. على الرغم من ذلك ستحاول هذه الدراسة أن تحدد في ظل أي ظروف يمكن للرئيس الأميركي تطبيق مخططاته الكبرى في ضوء طبيعة الفرص والضوابط المحلية والإقليمية والدولية وما هي عواقب هذه المخططات على مكانة الولايات المتحدة ومصالحها. إن أردنا أن نكون منصفين في التحليل الذي سنشرع به في تقييم عقيدة أوباما الدائمة التطور في ما يتعلق بالسياسة الخارجية  فستستعين هذه الدراسة بمقارنة أداء كل من جورج بوش وباراك أوباما في سدة الرئاسة في مجال السياسة الخارجية المتعلقة بالشرق الأوسط.  
عبر قيامنا بذلك ستسعى هذه الدراسة إلى التحقق مما إذا كان أوباما قد نجح في تطبيق "استراتيجية كبرى " في الشرق الأوسط خلال ولايته الأولى وجزء من ولايته الثانية. من جهة أخرى ستتطرق هذه الدراسة إلى مدى نجاح الرئيس في معالجة الأزمات المتعددة التي اندلعت في الشرق الأوسط  وإلى مدى تأثيرها على الولايات المتحدة وحلفائها في وجه الفرص والضوابط.  
لهذه الغاية، ستغطي الدراسة أداءات الاستراتيجية الأميركية في ما يتعلق بـ"الربيع العربي" والتدخل في ليبيا والسياسة تجاه مصر والتراخي الأميركي في الملف السوري والتوصل إلى اتفاقية مؤقتة مع إيران بخصوص البرنامج النووي وستنظر في عواقب هذه الأداءات على علاقات الولايات المتحدة مع السعودية والعراق.

- See more at: https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/obama%E2%80%99s-policy-middle-east-strategy-selective-engagement#sthash.3UoGHgPV.dpuf