

Is Obama Fundamentally Shifting His Middle East Strategy?

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The Saudis and Israelis are fuming. Obama's talks with Iran's new President Hassan Rouhani point to a possible new direction in U.S.-Middle East policy. Iran is the regional arch-rival of the Saudis and Israelis, who for decades have shared the mantle as the main U.S. allies in the Middle East.

The Arab Spring has — along with the ascendance of Russia and China — shifted the geopolitical ground of the region, and the U.S. is trying to maintain a dominant position with a new strategy. This shift, if successful, has the potential to create a political crisis within the U.S. government as well as abroad. Israel and Saudi Arabia, for example, won't quietly accept a diminished role in the Middle East.

Israel gave a thunderous response to Obama's Iranian talks last week by committing its fourth war crime against Syria in the last year, by [launching a bombing raid against a Syrian military installation](#). Since Obama is currently pursuing "Geneva II" peace talks with Syria and Russia, the timing of the Israeli bombing suggests that Israel is intent on not being ignored.

The Saudis, too, have fired missiles, though of the diplomatic type, aimed at the U.S. by refusing a seat at the UN Security Council. [The Saudis have also threatened a fundamental break from their long-standing U.S. ally](#), which in reality means a shift towards Russia and China.

There are three main factors that appear to be pushing Obama in a new Middle East direction: Obama's political defeat in the Syrian conflict, the United States' new ocean of natural (shale) gas, and the new Egyptian government's shift away from a long-standing U.S. alliance. The Middle East is changing fast.

The Syrian conflict exposed the United States' Middle East strategy as bankrupt; Obama planned a Bush-like bombing campaign to terrorize Syria into submission, but backed down at the last minute, due to immense domestic and international opposition, not to mention the fact that Islamic extremists linked to al-Qaeda were certain to come to power if Obama opened the gates of hell with U.S. missiles. Obama's last minute retreat was a historic blow to U.S. foreign policy, along the lines of the U.S. defeat in Vietnam.

By agreeing to the Russian plan of eliminating Syria's chemical weapons, Obama admitted humiliating defeat and signaled that the U.S. was abandoning the proxy war against the Syrian government, the war now completely dominated by Islamic extremists and foreign

jihad fighters; those who maintain that a legitimate mass “revolution” is still in play fool only themselves. Furthermore, those who claim that “the Israeli tail wags the American dog” were again proved wrong when the full force of Israeli/AIPAC lobbying — to attack Syria — was ultimately ignored.

Obama’s Syria shift also left Saudi Arabia in the lurch, which went “all in” against Syria by shipping huge amounts of money, arms, and Saudi nationals to destroy Assad’s Syria, no doubt with immense initial encouragement from Obama. If a Syrian peace deal is hatched at “Geneva II” (if in fact it ever happens), it’s certain that any outcome will make explicit Saudi Arabia’s waning influence in Syria.

Obama is also finally using the new U.S. flood of shale gas as a political weapon in his Middle East approach. The “natural gas revolution” threatens to change the face of the global oil/gas industry, and has energy giants Saudi Arabia and Russia shaking in their boots. This influx of American gas simply makes the Middle East less important.

An [interesting Reuters article reports](#):

“...surging North American energy production [shale gas] has brought the United States closer to a long-dreamed “energy independence” that is reshaping its goals and role in the Middle East.”

Henry Kissinger, arch-war criminal and modern architect of the oil-focused U.S. foreign policy, was quoted in the Reuters article:

“You could not make plans in the Middle East or involving Middle East crises, without keeping in mind the considerations of the oil market...but that is now changing substantially with the, I wouldn’t say ‘self sufficiency’ but narrowing the gap between supply and demand in North America [shale gas], that is now of huge strategic consequence.”

Of course, the U.S. is simply not going to leave the Middle East for the foreseeable future, but Kissinger’s comments make clear that the U.S. now has more strategic flexibility than it had before, and the blunt Bush Jr. policy of bombings and invasions has had to give way at some point to some actual strategy (bombings will of course remain as “leverage” in peace talks and be re-introduced if talks fail).

Finally, the long-standing strategic U.S. partnership with Egypt is crumbling before Obama’s eyes. The revolutionary mobilizations against U.S. ally Muhammad Morsi brought forth a military government that, according to its public statements and state media, is taking a staunchly anti-U.S. position. The many analysts who called Morsi’s ouster a “U.S. coup” should be re-thinking their position, as Morsi was profoundly more pro-U.S. than his replacement.

The [New York Times reports](#):

“Relations between the United States and Egypt, once-close allies, have grown increasingly strained...Since the military takeover, Egypt’s generals and their backers have lashed out at the United States, accusing it of showing favoritism

toward Mr. Morsi and his supporters in the Muslim Brotherhood by, among other things, criticizing the military government's withering crackdown on Islamists."

Egypt is also at the center of the U.S.-Saudi Arabia divorce, since Saudi Arabia is a huge backer of the new Egyptian military regime, displacing the Qatar-U.S. backed Muslim Brotherhood.

Again from The New York Times:

"Saudi Arabia, which strongly backs Egypt's generals, has also rebuked the United States over its Egypt policy."

Of course Obama still has time to give sufficient military aid and other bribes to bring Egypt back into the U.S.' diplomatic orbit, but for now relations are spoiled.

Why would Obama potentially risk long-standing regional alliances to make peace with Iran? For one, Iran's new president is a "reformer," which in Iran means that he wants to completely "open up" Iran's economy to foreign investors, and Obama sees an ocean of oil that could result in a sea of cash for U.S corporations and investors.

Iran's former president, Ahmadinejad, went on a privatization frenzy that U.S. corporations and investors watched with forlorn eyes, as U.S. sanctions limited U.S. investments, while corporations from other nations enriched themselves off Iran's formerly public assets. But Ahmadinejad viewed Iranian oil as a sacred cow, which, [as the Economist explains](#), is set to be butchered and sold by Rouhani to the highest bidder (or at potentially reduced rates to U.S corporations as part of a peace deal).

If Obama can get his hands on Iranian oil — without having to physically destroy Iran — he'll have little problem reducing the sanctions that have been economically destroying the country.

A peace with Iran will also have other profound regional implications. Doing business with the United States will push Russia and China out of the Iranian picture, amounting to a diplomatic coup for the United States, while Iran will likely be "urged" to cut off support for the Syrian government and Hezbollah, while making Shia-led Iraq more amenable to U.S. regional interests.

But achieving this major diplomatic shift will be incredibly difficult, and maybe impossible. Many U.S. congressmen from both parties want to maintain the status quo. As Obama initially announced his warming relations with Iran, Congressmen were preparing to increase the already-criminal sanctions, no doubt in an attempt to prevent any peace deal, [causing tension between Obama and Congress](#).

Israel, too, is just crazy enough to ruin the whole enterprise by unleashing a reign of terror; the recent attack on Syria may have been just a warning shot. An Israeli attack on Iran — ostensibly to destroy its "nuclear capabilities" — would be enough to annihilate any U.S. diplomatic effort.

Whatever happens ultimately will reflect the power shift occurring across the Middle East

and the re-alignment that has occurred since the Arab Spring, as well as the rise of China and Russia in the region. For now the U.S. is attempting to use diplomacy to gain a strategic advantage in the Middle East, which can very quickly revert to military actions if its goals of economic dominance aren't peacefully achieved.

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