
Published 05:14 11.02.11 | Latest update 05:14 11.02.11

Barack Obama is not Jimmy Carter

The 1979 Iran crisis produced a heated debate over the U.S. policy response. Obama's response to the Egypt crisis has enjoyed wide bipartisan support.

By Leon Hadar

Stunned by American pressure on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to yield to the calls of demonstrators to leave office, Israeli observers have compared President Barack Obama's treatment of this key Middle Eastern U.S. ally to the way former President Jimmy Carter forced another old pro-American regional leader, the shah of Iran, to resign in response to the revolution that had shaken that country in 1979.

Applying this historical analogy to personalize the U.S. response to the current Egyptian insurgency - proposing that Obama, like Carter, is an indecisive, weak, if not an "anti-Israeli" president - creates the misleading impression that Obama should be held responsible for the "loss" of Egypt and the collapse of the balance of power in the Middle East. And if Obama is Carter, then isn't it possible that a new Ronald Reagan could replace him and help reestablish U.S. power in the Middle East?

But a basic spot-the-difference exercise leads to a most intriguing discovery. The 1979 Iran crisis produced a heated debate inside and outside the Carter administration over the appropriate U.S. policy response. Leading figures in the bureaucracy, Congress and the media, including the entire Republican foreign policy establishment, blasted what they considered to be Carter's abandonment of the shah as part of his miscalculated effort to reach out to the Iranian revolutionaries.

Obama's response to the Egypt crisis, on the other hand, has enjoyed wide bipartisan support in Washington, with Democratic and Republican leaders, including former presidential candidate John McCain, extolling the anti-Mubarak demonstrators and urging the Egyptian president to step down. The only criticism of the White House has been directed at Obama's refusal to use the threat of cutting U.S. aid to Egypt to force Mubarak to quit.

To put it in simple terms, American officials and lawmakers, Democrats and Republicans alike, recognize that the policy being pursued by President Obama vis-a-vis Egypt is the product of an accurate cost-effective calculation of U.S. national interest in the Middle East today. Reflecting the loss of global economic and military power, Washington just doesn't have the leverage it needs to establish a Pax Americana in the region - whether it's in Egypt or Lebanon, Israel/Palestine or even in U.S.-occupied Iraq.

At the height of the Cold War, in 1979, the U.S. still maintained enormous military capabilities to help control its spheres of influence around the world, which included Iran. Carter's personal ideological biases - idealism rooted in a Wilsonian approach and strong Christian beliefs - coupled with his failure in managing foreign policy, were responsible for the series of diplomatic and military fiascos in Iran, which humiliated the United States and explained in part why the American people elected Ronald Reagan, who promised to restore U.S. power and pride.

But notwithstanding the occasional rhetoric, no one in Washington today seriously believes that the United States is in a position to regain its global primacy anytime soon. Instead, the growing consensus is that America will have to share power with such emerging global powers as China and India, and new regional players like Brazil and Turkey. Indeed, Turkey, like Iran, is already beginning to fill the strategic vacuum created by the gradual U.S. strategic retreat.

Ironically, those who compare the protest movements in Poland, East Germany and Czechoslovakia in 1989 to those in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen today, miss the point. It's not that the Egyptian insurgency is fueled by the same democratic-liberal ideals that drove the uprising in Poland. It probably is not. But this we do know: In both cases, the old order was maintained by an external power - the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe in 1989; the United States in the Middle East today.

If anything, Obama is now trying to come up with the least costly strategy to help manage American decline in the Middle East, not unlike the man who presided over the collapse of Soviet power in Eastern Europe in 1989. Mikhail Gorbachev had hoped that Moscow's willingness to allow the downfall of its friendly dictators in Warsaw, Prague, Budapest and Berlin, would help preserve Soviet influence in the region.

And like Gorbachev, Obama and the rest of the political establishment in Washington believe that backing the protest movements in Egypt and elsewhere in the region, and partnering the United States with the dramatic change in the Middle East - that is, being on the right side of history - will make it possible for the Americans to drive that transformation to the benefit of long-term U.S. interests.

But there is no Egyptian Lech Walesa or an Iraqi Vaclav Havel - not to mention the enormous pro-American sentiments that were shared by the Eastern Europeans who had been ruled by the Soviets, and that are nonexistent in Egypt and much of the Arab world today. That means that Obama has his work cut out for him in the Middle East. Israelis who hope to maintain some modicum of U.S. influence in the region should wish him luck. He is no Carter. And no Reagan is waiting in the wings.

Dr. Leon Hadar is a research fellow at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based think tank, and the author of "Sandstorm: Policy Failure in the Middle East" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).