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## **Obama on the Middle East: No Game Changer**

Posted: 05/19/11 04:52 PM ET

Wishful thinkers who had expected President Barack Obama to lay out a new U.S. grand strategy for the Middle East -- the so-called Obama Doctrine -- during his much-anticipated address at the State Department on Thursday were bound to be disappointed.

That post-1945 American presidents were able to enunciate a series of U.S. "doctrines" to help mobilize support at home and abroad for American policy in the Middle East reflected a reality in which Washington -- driven by pressures of the Cold War and the Arab-Israeli conflict -- was advancing a set of core strategic goals that seemed to be aligned with U.S. interests and values.

The "good guys" deserving U.S. protection and support were the "moderate" Arab regimes that were supporting American (and Western) interests, providing access to the region's oil resources, and seeking some form of coexistence with Israel. In that context, it is important to remember that until the administration of President George W. Bush started advancing its Freedom Agenda, no administration declared that spreading democracy was a core U.S. interest in the region.

The current political upheaval in the Middle East is just the latest and most dramatic in a series of changes that have been transforming the region since the end of the Cold War and that are making it more difficult for any U.S. president to articulate a set of principles that could guide policy in an area of the world that has been drawing in more U.S. military and economic resources.

Indeed, Obama's speech only helped to demonstrate the failure on the part of the president and other officials and lawmakers to provide a clear rationale for U.S. intervention in the Middle East. Hence, Obama was trying to draw the outline of a revisionist narrative in which the goals of the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia were aligned with U.S. interests and values -- despite the fact that the demonstrators there ended up ousting from power staunch pro-American allies.

And while most Americans would probably applaud Obama's call for protecting individual rights, freedom of religion, the emancipation of women, and the promotion of free markets in Egypt and other Arab countries, there are no indications that the majority of the people who are driving the change that supports these principles.

If anything, considering the findings of several [opinion polls](#) conducted in the Middle East, Arab governments who will be more responsive to their people's aspirations are probably going to be less inclined to move in the direction set by Obama and to embrace policies that will be less favorable to the interests of the U.S. and Israel.

Reiterating -- as Obama did in his speech -- that the collapse of the authoritarian regimes in the region doesn't have to lead to civil wars between religious, ethnic and groups sounds nice. But the experience of Iraq -- not to mention Lebanon -- suggests otherwise, especially as the struggle between Sunnis and Shiites seems to be spilling over into Bahrain and the rest of the Persian Gulf.

And while in Iraq U.S. policies are helping to put in place a Shiite-led government with ties to Iran, in Bahrain Washington is backing the Saudis in their effort to suppress a Shiite revolt backed by Iran.

In fact, the alliance between the U.S. and the Saudi Arabian theocracy -- less democratic than Syria, more corrupt than Libya, the purveyor of radical Islamic values, where women and non-Muslims have no political and other rights -- makes a mockery of much of what Obama was saying on Thursday.

Moreover, Obama's address on Thursday also highlighted what could be construed as a paradox. The more American military and financial commitments in the Middle East keep rising the more the U.S. becomes marginalized in the process.

Indeed, contrary to the hopes articulated by some Arabs and Israelis, Obama's speech did not amount to the kind of "game changer" that could bring back to life the dormant Palestinian-Israeli peace process. There is very little that the Obama administration could do to change the status-quo in Israel/Palestine. Why pretend otherwise?

Well, perhaps because Obama believes that he does not have any other choice but to continue muddling through in the Middle East from which the U.S. will not be able to extricate itself anytime soon. Hence, Obama's disjointed response to the upheaval in the Arab World: Grudgingly supporting the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, unenthusiastically backing limited military action in Libya, projecting a nuanced attitude to the unrest in Bahrain, and confounding supporters and opponents in Washington and in the Middle East who tend to project into him the respective fantasies (peacemaker) or nightmares (anti-Israeli).

That may not a doctrine. But then that is not too bad if you consider that his predecessor in office had one. With the single-minded determination required to prevail in ideological combat, W. saw the world through the prism of a Great Idea -- the struggle between Good

and Evil -- and tried to impose it on a the complex reality of Iraq where the ethnic and religious identities took precedence over notions of democracy and liberalism.

Obama should be praised for recognizing that what is happening in the Middle East may follow neither the model of Iran in 1979 (radical Islam) nor the outline of Eastern Europe in 1989 (liberal democracy), but could instead generate a mishmash of changes that don't fit into a linear and coherent pattern. But at some point, the costs of his ad-hocish and accommodating responses to the developments in the region could prove too high to sustain in the long run.