

Leon Hadar

I attended a book event for Ronald Reagan Jr. in Washington, DC, where he thanked his bother Michael for bashing his new memoir about their father. “It really helped increase the sales of my book,” Ron quipped. Indeed, there is no such thing as bad publicity, or as Oscar Wilde put it, “The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about.”

So if I was responsible for making policy in Jerusalem, Ramallah, Beirut, Cairo or Riyadh, I would be somewhat concerned after President Barack Obama’s State of the Union Address (SOTUA) where neither Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt or Saudi Arabia were mentioned in one sentence. The omission was intriguing since on the same day Obama was addressing Congress, the front pages of *The New York Times* and other “elite” newspapers carried reports about the election of a pro-Hizbollah Prime Minister in Lebanon, of political unrest and anti-government violence in Egypt, and of new revelations about the failed efforts to reach Israeli-Palestinian agreement.

If you skim through presidential SOTUAs since World War II – and especially since the 1967 and 1973 Middle East wars – the issue of U.S. policy in the region and its support for Israel and other American allies, including the effort to achieve Arab-Israeli peace have featured prominently in most of these addresses. And that was not surprising. Through the many presidential Cold War “doctrines” (Truman; Eisenhower; Carter), terrorist attacks, oil embargoes, military interventions, and “peace processes,” the Middle East and its major players were perceived to be central to U.S. strategic and economic interests. In fact, under President George W. Bush, U.S. Mideast policy seemed to dominate his SOTUAs. And let us not forget the almost obligatory reiteration of American support for Israel by most U.S. Presidents through the years.

Obama briefly mentioned Iraq in his address – to mark the withdrawal of U.S. troops from there with no expression of support for the Iraqi government. And he did praise the pro-democracy protestors in Tunisia but without integrating these comments into a grand American narrative of Democracy Promotion in the Middle East.

So what are we to make of the short shrifting of the Mideast by Obama? Some would argue that the focus of the address was on economic policies and not only foreign policy. After all, not even America's allies in Europe were mentioned. But in fact, the main theme of the SOTUA ("The Sputnik Moment") was global – not domestic: The U.S. needs to restructure its economy, reform education, become more innovative, etc. in order to enhance its competitive edge vis-à-vis China, India, Korea and the other Asian emerging markets. In a way, Obama seems to be responding the new geostrategic and geo-economic realities, in which U.S. has no choice but to start reducing its costly commitments in the Middle East, including the support for Arab dictators and autocrats and the futile peace processing, and start investing its time and effort in strengthening its ties with the nations and economies of the Pacific Rim, with the winners of the 21st century.

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