

Obama Offers Little New In Middle East Speech

Experts say Obama follows well trod path

By [JESSICA RETTIG](#)
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President Obama's speech on the Middle East today offered few surprises for Washington foreign policy experts.

While celebrating the fight for universal freedom and scolding oppressive regimes, President Obama laid out his plans for change in the region, which includes investment in Egypt and Tunisia and providing democratic alternatives to authoritarianism.

He also took what some perceive as a bold position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, encouraging a return to its pre-1967 borders. However, Obama's inclusion of "mutually agreed swaps" in the two-state solution makes this policy less surprising, experts say, since it doesn't differ much with ideas proposed under previous presidents.

By sticking with policies similar to those endorsed by the Bush administration, Obama seemed to be recycling rhetoric, says Jonathan Schanzer, a former [terrorism](#) intelligence analyst at the Treasury Department under the Bush administration and currently vice president of research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a neoconservative foreign policy think tank. "We're watching, to some extent, this president coming to many of the same realizations that his predecessor came to over the course of his presidency," said Schanzer. "This president, unfortunately, due to what's happening in the region, has fallen back to lessons that have been previously learned. He's had to come to them in his own way, and that's what we're watching happen on the world stage."

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According to Shibley Telhami, the Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland and a nonresident fellow at the liberal leaning Brookings Institution, the president, while only just "tipping the can forward" in terms of concrete policy, did "a good job consolidating a constructive image" for the American people of the Middle East. "With the American public side of it, I thought he did reasonably well," he said.

Indeed, in his speech, the president drew comparisons between the current revolutionary movements in the Arab world with America's own times of struggle, making references to the patriots at the Boston Tea Party and to civil rights activist Rosa Parks. "For the American people, the scenes of upheaval in the region may be unsettling, but the forces driving it are not unfamiliar. Our own nation was founded through a rebellion against an empire," the president said. "Our people fought a painful Civil War that extended freedom and dignity to those who were enslaved. And I would not be standing here today unless past generations turned to the moral force of nonviolence as a way to perfect our union--organizing, marching, protesting peacefully together to make real those words that declared our nation."

Obama also should be commended for acknowledging the limited extent that the death of bin Laden and the United States has played in the popular uprisings in the region, says Chris Preble, the director of foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. "There was a certain element of humility and a realistic sense of what our role has been so far, and what our role is in the future," he says. "At the end of the day, these issues are driven from the bottom up and there's definitely a limit in what the United States can do to shape events over there."

[\[See photos of the unrest in Libya.\]](#)

Moving forward, Preble says Obama will have to explain how the proposed aid to Egypt can effectively contribute to the country's transition. Also, he says that Obama should still expect challenges on military actions taken in Libya, especially given the president's less aggressive stance elsewhere in the region and the rest of the world where the level of oppression and violence is similarly high.

Schanzer also felt that the president's position on Syria was "troubling," particularly where the president said, "President Assad now has a choice: He can lead that transition, or get out of the way." Schanzer responds, "It's unclear to me how Assad could remain in power, much less lead a transition. That's naive at best."