

The President's Next Middle East Speech

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The news media is abuzz with speculation about what President Obama will say in an address this Thursday at the State Department. The topic is the Middle East, and [White House Press Secretary Jay Carney explained](#), "we've gone through a remarkable period in the first several months of this year...in the Middle East and North Africa," and the president has "some important things to say about how he views the upheaval and how he has approached the U.S. response to the events in the region." The speech, Carney hinted to reporters, would be "fairly sweeping and comprehensive."

If I were advising the president, I would urge him to say many of the same things that he [said](#) in his [June 2009 speech in Cairo](#), this time with some timely references to the recent killing of Osama bin Laden, and an explanation of what the killing means for U.S. counterterrorism operations, and for our relations with the countries in the region.

Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, al Qaeda's long-time number two (now, presumably, its number one) railed for years about overthrowing the "apostate" governments in North Africa and the Middle East. And yet, one of the biggest stories from the popular movements that have swept aside the governments in Tunisia and Egypt, and may yet do so in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, is al Qaeda's utter irrelevance. President Obama won't need to dwell on this very long to make an important point.

The killing of Osama bin Laden doesn't signal the end of al Qaeda, but it might signal the beginning of the end. In reality, al Qaeda has been under enormous pressure for years, but that hasn't stopped the organization from carrying out attacks—attacks which have mainly killed and injured innocent Muslims since 9/11. It is no wonder that al Qaeda is enormously unpopular in the one place where bin Laden and his delusional cronies sought to install the new Caliphate. How's that working out, Osama?

Al Qaeda had nothing to do with the reform movements that have swept across North Africa and the Middle East; the United States has had little to do with them either. That is as it should be. These uprisings were spontaneous, arising from the bottom up, and they are more likely to endure because they were not imposed by outsiders. Sadly, the same will not be said of the Libyans who rose up against Muammar Qaddafi, without any special encouragement from the United States. If the anti-Qaddafi forces ultimately succeed in overthrowing his four-decades long rule, President Obama's decision to intervene militarily on their behalf ensures that some will question their legitimacy. The same would be true in Syria, or in Iran, if the United States were seen as having a hand in selecting the future leaders of those countries.

Barack Obama was elected president in part because he publicly opposed the decision to go to war in Iraq at a time when many Americans, including many in his own party, were either supportive or silent. He had a special credibility with the American people, and among people in the Middle East, because he worried that the Iraq war was likely to undermine American and regional security, cost hundreds of billions of dollars, and claim many tens of thousands of lives. Tragically, he was correct.

There is a right way, and a wrong way, to go about promoting human freedom. In Thursday's speech, I hope that the president reaffirms the importance of peaceful regime change from within, not American-sponsored regime change from without.

The United States remains, as it has been for two centuries, the well-wisher to people's democratic aspirations all over the world. But we learned a painful lesson in Iraq, and we should be determined not to repeat that error elsewhere. That is a message worth repeating, both for audiences over there, and for those over here.

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