

# Obama's Middle East Platitudes

President Barack Obama's speech on a "new chapter" in U.S. policy toward the Middle East was filled with platitudes befitting a New Year's resolution, but there is little expectation that he will follow through, especially on the hardest issues like the Israeli-Palestinian impasse, says Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

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I watched President Obama's May 19 [speech](#) on the Middle East while working out at the gym, since I have always found it easier to listen to politicians while I'm busy doing something else. That way, if they say something silly or ignorant, I can distract myself.

This mellows out some of the anger or amazement that I would feel if I were paying full attention to them. I find it's a healthier way of dealing with this sort of situation.

So there I was riding the stationary bike with half of me concentrating on keeping a steady speed and the other half concentrating on the President. That latter half of me soon felt that there was something familiar about Obama's talk. Not just the words but the character of the talk.

I decided to give it 80 percent of my attention to figure out what all those words reminded me of. At mile four I had it. They reminded me of a New Year's resolution.

Like most New Year's resolutions, the President's words were full of good intentions. After all, life in the prior months had pointed out problems regarding his approach to the Arab Spring in ways that were hard to ignore.

And, that is how President Obama approached the facts of the Arab Spring. "The people of the Middle East and North Africa [have] taken their future into their own hands," he said, noting that these events "mark a new chapter in American diplomacy."

But what should the "new chapter" consist of? The President told us: "the United States of America was founded on the belief that people should govern themselves. Now, we cannot hesitate to stand squarely on the side of those who are reaching for their rights."

So, our New Year's resolution in May is to live up to our principles, to be true to our values.

An Aside: Anyone who knows the history of U.S. foreign policy (and I have written a book on the subject entitled Foreign Policy Inc.) can tell you that there is no connection between actual policy and the promotion of democracy. Quite the contrary.

That is why all our “friends” in the Middle East are autocrats. But, just for argument sake, let’s assume along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, that a “first rate intelligence,” and the President certainly is that, can “hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.”

Then we can imagine that this speech gives precedence to the idealized notion of foreign policy goals which are ones that contradict the actual goals pursued to date.

Okay. We now know in what direction the “new chapter in American diplomacy” is suppose to go. It is time to move from the general resolution, to some specific behaviors. Typically full of determination, we start off strong.

A) This is not difficult because we begin with the easy things, the things we are already doing.

We don’t like the Iranian government. We will continue to be obstructive and negative toward it. We don’t like the Syrian government. We will continue to sanction it. And we especially don’t like the Libyan government. We will continue to try to destroy it.

This isn’t really part of the “new chapter in American Diplomacy,” but we figure there should be some continuity as we transition into the future.

B) Then we move on to the stuff we are pretty sure we can accomplish. We like the Tunisians now and so the President tells us “we are working with Congress to create Enterprise Funds to invest in Tunisia and Egypt.” No word on what strings might be attached to this.

We like the Egyptians now and so “we will relieve a democratic Egypt of up to \$1 billion in debt.” Simultaneously, “we will help Egypt...by guaranteeing \$1 billion in borrowing.” A bit of a mixed message here, but we can’t always be totally original.

C) Then we move to what can only be described as our “wish list” of resolutions. The things we would like to see done but don’t know if we really have the will power to do it.

This is really the moment of truth because all the easy stuff doesn’t really constitute anything new at all. If we are going to actually create a “new

chapter in American diplomacy” it is the tough changes that need to be actualized. So here we go:

1. “We acknowledge that our friends in the region have not all reacted to the demands for change consistent with the principles that I [President Obama] have outlined today.”

Well, actually none of them have done so. This acknowledgment begs the question, just how are we going to change American policy so as to change the behavior of these dictators?

2. “Bahrain is a long-standing partner, and we are committed to its security. We recognize that Iran has tried to take advantage of the turmoil there, and that the Bahraini government has a legitimate interest in the rule of law. Nevertheless, we have insisted publicly and privately that mass arrests and brute force are at odds with the universal rights of Bahrain’s citizens. ... The government must create the conditions for dialogue.”

Judging from its behavior, the Bahraini monarchy would not know “the rule of law” if it tripped over it. How are we going to change American policy so as to encourage change in Bahraini policy?

3. “Yemen, where President Saleh needs to follow through on his commitment to transfer power.” It is pretty clear that President Saleh is resisting this. How is the U.S. going to change American policy to encourage change in Saleh’s attitude?

4. And then there is the perennial destroyer of America’s perennially declared good intentions – Israel.

“The borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed [land] swaps, so that secure and recognized borders are established for both states. The Palestinian people must have the right to govern themselves, and reach their potential, in a sovereign and contiguous state.”

On the other hand, “Israel must be able to defend itself – by itself – against any threat.”

In addition, “ultimately, it is up to the Israelis and Palestinians to take action. No peace can be imposed upon them.”

What does all this mean? It means that President Obama might personally feel that the Israelis should stop stalling and give the Palestinians a fair and just peace, but as a politician he does not have the strength to make them do it.

I guess we should give the President credit for having the courage to state his mind here. However, the administration as a whole hasn't got the will power to carry through on this resolution.

That leaves the Israelis off the hook. Prime Minister Netanyahu wasted no time calling the bluff. There will be no Palestinian state at the "expense of Israeli existence." And, the Israelis can't go back to the 1967 lines because those lines are "indefensible." That is "the reality" of things.

This, of course, is nonsense. Those borders have been repeatedly defended in more than successful fashion.

If the 1967 borders were not defensible, Israeli settlements would not be sitting east of those lines, in the West Bank and Golan Heights. If those borders were not defensible, the Gaza Strip could not be suffocated by an illegal blockade as it now is, and Lebanon would be moving Palestinian refugees back into the Galilee.

Netanyahu is making up his own "reality" here and it is the U.S. that has given him the power to insist that everyone else, even his patron, play by his rules. That is the sort of monster we have helped create.

So, there we have it. Real New Year's resolutions, those that really do establish "new chapters" in our lives, are all about will power. And, when it comes to "our friends in the region" we have damn little will power.

It isn't that there aren't behavioral/policy changes we could make to create that "new chapter in American diplomacy." It is just a question of carrying through. Here are a few of the steps the U.S. government could take, if it had the will power to do so, to transform resolutions into reality:

1. Stop the arms sales.

While we tell the Bahraini monarchy that they "must" dialogue with their opposition, we are giving them \$19.5 million dollars worth of weapons in 2011. With that kind of aid they can simply carry on arresting or murdering all the people they are suppose to talk to.

Also, when it comes to Bahrain, threaten to close down our naval base there. A similar situation exists with Yemen. While we tell the Yemeni president that he "needs to" transfer power, we are giving his security forces \$116 million in weapons in 2011. What sort of mixed message is this?

If we want to create that wonderful new chapter in diplomacy, cancel the weapons deals. Actually there is some indication that Congress is taking a second look

at these sales, but not because of any desire to help along those seeking “self-determination – the chance to make of life what we will.”

No, what is worrying the Congress is that, if our friendly dictators fall, American weapons will end up in the hands of the Iranians, or maybe even Al Qaida.

Here is that disconnect between U.S. diplomacy and the promotion of democracy. Maybe the House and Senate Foreign Relations Committees don't have the same New Year's resolutions as the President.

2. Act on what authority the President has to distance the U.S. from Israel.

Israel is due to get \$3.075 *billion* for weapons from the U.S. in 2012. Unfortunately, Congress will make sure the Zionists get that bonanza whatever President Obama's wishes. But there are other things Obama can do to send a message to the Israelis that it is not just business as usual.

For instance, as Commander and Chief, he can call a halt to all U.S.-Israeli joint military activities. He can shut the Israelis out of any intelligence sharing. But he won't.

Hell will freeze over before the U.S. “stands squarely on the side of [the Palestinians who] are reaching for their rights.” There is no will power for this one. It is doomed.

3. The President and his staff can push a citizens' awareness campaign about the importance of foreign policy. About why the public should pay attention to it, how it is formulated (particularly the role of lobbies), what “blowback” comes from present policy positions and why it does so. We can throw in the defining of national interest as against the parochial interests of particular groups, as well.

One wonders just who a speech like this is for? Is it the people of the Middle East?

Their historical experience of Western foreign policy, including that of the United States, is one of repeated disappointment. They have been lied to too many times to count. They have been lied to even when the liar does not know he is lying (one thinks of the experience of T.E. Lawrence in this regard and this may or may not be the case with Obama as well).

So, my guess is that most of the people in the region who listened to the May 19 speech will come away filled with skepticism. Their response will almost certainly be, “prove it, Mr. President.” Show us the will power to bring that

“new chapter” from idealized theory into practice.

Or, is the speech largely for the American people? If so, most will be somewhat taken aback.

What is this talk of a “new chapter in American diplomacy” all about? We thought that supporting democracy has always been the policy! Confusion.

The Congress, both Republicans and Democrats, won't let the discussion go in the direction of clearing the confusion up. Rather they will nitpick the speech to death, concentrating on that bit about Israel and the 1967 border.

Prime Minister Netanyahu is in town to help them do just that. Pretty soon the American people will lose interest. After all, they as most people everywhere, are not too interested in faraway places.

Unless it is explained to them, they don't see how it impacts their lives (all more so now that bin Laden is dead). My guess is that Obama's speech, except for references to Israel's borders, is old news in a week's time.

The last word goes to one of the fathers of classical conservatism, Edmund Burke, who pointed out that “a state without the means to change is without the means of its conservation.” Need one say more?

**Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America's National Interest; America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood; and Islamic Fundamentalism.**

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