

## HAS OBAMA FAILED?

Most of the world had huge hopes for Barack Obama when he succeeded George W. Bush as president of the United States in January 2009. Obama's intelligence and style drew everyone's attention, but he also seemed poised to set a very different course for the globe's only superpower.

If only. The economic downturn -attributable to his predecessor's bungling, to be sure -sapped U.S. will and saddled the Obama administration with huge fiscal problems and deficits. The Taliban enemy in Afghanistan continued to prove difficult to subdue, despite increasing numbers of American troops, and Afghan President Hamid Karzai's regime remained as corrupt and incompetent as ever. Iraq as a military operation was winding down, but there was little stability there and scant signs of political success. The terrorist prison at Guantanamo was to be shut down, but now Obama has decided it must stay open for the foreseeable future.

And all that was before the Middle East policy debacles of the past few months. First, the Tunisian people toppled an unpopular regime. Then Egypt followed suit and staunch American ally president Hosni Mubarak fell from power in the face of public demonstrations and what seems like a military coup. At a stroke, a vital prop of U.S. policy in the region was gone, the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty was threatened, and the future government in Cairo might well turn out to be Islamist in nature.

The American response to all this can best be described as tepid, cautious to the extreme. There was no support for Mubarak, so little reward for fealty, that Saudi Arabia, another American ally, reportedly was furious enough at Obama's abandonment of a longtime ally that it permitted Iranian naval vessels to dock at Saudi harbours. The Saudi monarchy clearly feared that if Obama abandoned Mubarak, he might do the same when the popular protests reached the desert kingdom. The large numbers of unemployed young people and unhappy Shiites, likely stirred up by Tehran, soon began making serious sounds of unhappiness. And Washington seemed unable to stop the Iranian regime's march toward the acquisition of nuclear weapons, and equally unwilling to allow Israel to strike at the country's nuclear plants.

Then there was Bahrain, the site of a large American naval base, and Yemen, whose government had vigorously fought against al-Qaeda at American behest. In both nations, the popular revolts were in full swing, huge numbers in the streets while the embattled governments struggled desperately to buy them off with promises of change to come. If these governments fall, the U.S. position in the Middle East will be in tatters, and Iranian influence and power will be preeminent, even without nuclear weapons. With them, it will be unassailable.

All this was before the Libyan revolt. Here the American administration's weakness and indecisiveness has been fully revealed. There was verbal support for the rebels against the Gadhafi regime, notwithstanding the warm embrace the Libyan despot had received from the West in the last few years. Gadhafi was a changed man, or so those hungry for business deals and concessions said, while his secret police continued torturing dissidents. His military used its sophisticated, if obsolescent and ill-maintained, weapons against the rebels, killing hundreds if not thousands. Washington properly declared Gadhafi a monster, but it took no action.

Instead Britain and France took the lead, reportedly sending special forces into Libya to gather intelligence and possibly to proffer aid to the rebels. NATO desultorily considered a no-fly zone, while U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates contrarily pointed to all the difficulties such an effort

might entail. Yes, Obama deployed U.S. navy assets into the Mediterranean, but while there were some hawks pressing the president to act, there was no sign that they might be employed to force Gadhafi to stop killing his regime's opponents or to assist the rebels.

It used to be said by critics that Canada offered all aid short of help in global crises; now regrettably the same might be suggested of the Obama administration as it loses its position and influence in a critical part of the world.

Is that too harsh? The United States six months ago could count on Israel -however disgruntled the Netanyahu government was -Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Yemen, and a benign Libya that had stopped causing trouble. Today, very little remains. The Saudis, their oil resources notwithstanding, fear that Washington will abandon them if their people revolt. So do the governments in Bahrain and Yemen. And Libya, where Gadhafi is now clearly winning the military struggle, is unlikely to be friendly to the West when the dust settles.

Gadhafi received only abuse from the West (and reportedly got arms from Syria). Why should the victor show any gratitude to the U. S.?

At a minimum, the promise of two years ago has been dashed completely, at least in the Middle East. The Obama administration has been weak, unfaithful to its friends, and unwilling to strike at its enemies either militarily or diplomatically. Despite its economic problems, Iran is in the catbird seat. Is it too soon to declare Obama's American foreign policy an unmitigated disaster?

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