



166

NOVEMBER
2012

OBAMA'S PRESIDENTIAL LEGACY, AT STAKE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Eduard Soler i Lecha, Research Fellow CIDOB

A sense of relief was felt on November 6th in the Middle East when the U.S. Presidential elections results were made public. Obama's victory was not perceived as the solution to Middle East problems but the alternative could have been a destabilizing factor in this region. Although there were no disagreements in substance between Democrats and Republicans, Mitt Romney was much more aggressive in his discourse. This was evident in his unconditional support for Israel and for a pre-emptive attack against Iran should the latter country keep developing its defiant nuclear program. In a nutshell: while in 2008 Obama's victory meant change and gave hope, in 2012 it meant continuity and did not create many expectations.

The 2008 elections were perceived as an opportunity to put an end to the destructive policies pursued by George W. Bush, which had widened the emotional gap between the U.S. and people in the Middle East. Obama's famous speech in Cairo, "A new beginning", was aimed at connecting with those who were ready to give the U.S. a second chance. Even in Turkey, many people shared those feelings. As a well-known journalist, Amberin Zaman put it in 2009, the opportunity to turn a fresh page in Turkish-American relations had never been better.

Obama's first victory raised hopes in the Middle East. Hope in the possibility of achieving a durable peace in the region and pursuing a more neutral policy regarding Israel and the Palestinians. This was a time in which it was still possible to find Obama t-shirts and other merchandising products in the markets of Cairo and other cities of the region. The fascination did not last long, and hope gave way to frustration. The inability to unlock the Middle East Peace Process, initially through the Quartet and later through U.S.-led indirect talks, has been the best example of Obama's inability to translate his convictions into tangible results. As a result, the image of the U.S. and of Obama himself deteriorated significantly in 2010. According to the *Annual Arab Opinion Surveys* published by Zogby International, in 2009 47% of the respondents were hopeful regarding Obama's policies in the Middle East, while in 2010 only 19% kept those hopes alive.

But then came the “Arab Spring”, which was seen as an unprecedented opportunity to win the hearts and minds of the Arab population. The U.S. decision to withdraw its support from Hosni Mubarak, combined with NATO intervention in Libya, opened new avenues to reconnect with Arab societies and, particularly, with Arab political activists. Indeed, the polls showed a significant improvement in the image of the U.S. in the region in 2011. The *Arab Opinion Survey* highlighted the increase in those having positive views of the U.S. (from 10% in 2010 to 26% in 2011). Similarly, the *Transatlantic Trends* report of 2012 showed that 34% of the Turkish population viewed the United States favorably, a number that is steadily on the rise, from only 22% in 2009.

Although the positive image of the U.S. and Obama is still very weak in the Middle East, it seems that at least some of those who were hopeful in 2009 could be willing to give him a second chance. At this juncture, expectations are much lower but this is not bad news for U.S. policy in the Middle East. Lower expectations could translate into larger margins of maneuver.

Economic uncertainty, both domestic and global, will remain the foremost concern of the White House and, regarding foreign policy, Asia is often identified as becoming the top priority. However, unexpected events can overturn this agenda. The MENA region, as well as the Sahel, are highly unstable and new tensions are certainly going to emerge in the next four years. The escalation of tension in Gaza, only a few days after the elections, is a good example of how, like it or not, the Obama administration must devote part of its time and energies to the Middle East, if only because increasing tension in this part of the world could jeopardize the feeble recovery of the global and U.S. economy.

Moreover, the Middle East will test the limits of U.S. global influence. The frustration regarding U.S. policies in the region will only increase if Washington sticks to a “wait and see” policy in Syria, if it is incapable of persuading China and Russia to abandon their support for Al-Assad and, even more, if the U.S. cannot force Israel’s Prime Minister to loosen his iron hand and make concessions so as to unlock the peace process or, at least, to avoid an escalation of the conflict following the recent events in Gaza.

Some of the challenges that the second Obama administration will face in the next four years are already known: the Iranian nuclear program, the armed struggle in Syria, the Arab-Israeli conflict, political instability and social unrest across the MENA region and the re-emergence of Egypt and Turkey as key actors in the Middle Eastern arena. Other challenges are still unknown. The Middle East, as recent history has shown us, can hold many more surprises. The results of U.S. policies in the Middle East, its capacity to anticipate new crises, and the managing of ongoing tensions will be carefully scrutinized by politicians, experts and public opinion alike. This will have significant weight in the final evaluation, not only of Obama’s second term, but of his whole presidency. Not only the resilience of Obama’s foreign policy, but a significant part of his Presidential legacy to the world, will be at stake in this region.