

Perspectives

Vol. III Issue 11, December 2011

President Obama and the Arab Change

by Amb. Osman Siddique

The media and pundits have a proclivity to portray a negative picture of America, representing an unfair and short-sighted view of both what it took to earn to greatness of America and what it will require to reassert our leadership in the world. The challenges faced by this administration are unprecedented, and it is only fair to say that President Obama has demonstrated a willingness to do much of what was necessary under very difficult circumstances. Without minimizing the difficulties encountered and our impatience, it is useful to take stock of where we are.

President Obama took office in a widespread belief that the war in Iraq was never-ending. Even though as a US senator and a presidential candidate strenuously opposing the war, Mr. Obama knew that he had to transition out of this misconstrued war in a manner that would not hurt US interests or embolden the forces in Iran in fueling greater anti-Americanism in the region. It took a great deal of planning, fortitude and level-headedness for this administration to lay the groundwork towards a systematic disengagement from an unpopular and unnecessary intervention initiated by the Bush administration.

A President does not have the luxury to wish away the circumstances he inherited or the series of blunders that got us into our predicament. In addressing the problems affecting our economy, as well as our foreign policy, President Obama faced the fact that we had inherited deeply entrenched quagmires and has been methodically seeing through the process of repairing the economy and disengaging from Iraq. While the economic recovery remains vulnerable to shocks, there is no doubt that we averted a far bleaker crisis, and are gradually rebuilding our economy. Additionally, in the case of Iraq, the last US combat brigades departed in 2010. The remaining 50,000 personnel are expected to leave by December 31, 2011, on the path to bring an end to this "endless war."

After getting rid of Osama bin Laden, President Obama in his recent pronouncements has laid out a roadmap for America's eventual disengagement from Afghanistan. This plan, earlier endorsed by General Petraeus, now the newly appointed Director of the CIA, current Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and his predecessor Robert Gates, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, has an initial drawdown of 10,000 troops with a total reduction of 33,000 by the end of next summer. While channels of negotiations have been established with the Taliban to chart the future course of Afghanistan's politics and governance, we will still have about 68,000 troops overseeing the process. Although the endgame in Afghanistan remains unpredictable, it is still wise to have in place determinants of an evolving exit

strategy that this administration has laid out.

By 2008, numerous polls indicated that respect for America and its credibility were eroding in virtually all parts of the world. In Europe, where we have historically enjoyed the best relations, our public approval plummeted. The negativity towards the US was most severe in the Middle East and South East Asia, where key Muslim and Arab populations were shifting away from seeing America as an ally, including in countries that had traditionally been our friends. During my travels as a former US ambassador, I heard many longstanding friends of the US bemoan that the American beacon seemed so distant and dim.

It is in this backdrop that President Obama courageously took the message of America to Cairo, an epicenter of the Arab and Muslim cultures. As President Obama declared in Cairo that America was a friend of the Muslim world and that the American values of democracy and inter-religious tolerance would also benefit the Arab and Muslim worlds, his speech was denigrated by many cable show pundits and Republican politicians as naïve or capitulatory. Nothing could have been farther from the truth. In 1987,

President Reagan courageously asked Mr. Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall and that inspired hope. In 2009, President Obama's historic speech to an auditorium filled with young Egyptians (and broadcast across the world) was a similar message of hope. There is no doubt that the young people heard a message that resonated far and deep, fostering a momentum of hope unprecedented by any American president in the region. Despite the

"We must not lose sight of the popular demands of the vast majority of these people and not succumb to any interim expediency. History will never forgive us."

criticism that ensued, we should not forget the visionary approach that has characterized this administration in numerous ways. The Global Entrepreneurship Program led by State Department exemplified President Obama's engagement to create a bridge between the MENA region and America in based on our country's entrepreneurial culture. It is this very same vision that is now guiding the

Obama administration in engaging with the Arab world in the post-Arab Spring.

The swiftness of the Arab Spring took all of us by surprise. But even in this fluid situation, country after country, the President has shown that the United States understands the aspirations of the millions, supporting their political aspirations toward the creation of democratic environment and a prosperous economy. What was particularly galvanizing was the large number of young women who were in the forefront of this struggle. This is a different dynamic than what we typically imagine – and represents early triumphs of democratic, progressive ideals over the extremism of fatwa-based Al Qaeda rule. This progress, however, is tenuous, and there is much the US can and must do to empower and support those fighting decades-long dictatorships. As much as we are relieved with the political outcome in Tunisia, recent events in Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Libya must be taken notice of and addressed directly. Any attempt to hijack the process by vested interest groups must be thwarted. We must not lose sight of the popular demands of the vast majority of these people and not succumb to any interim expediency. History will never forgive us.

At a time when we face competition from an economically robust and expansive China, an ideologically-determined Iran, and the destruction of violent extremism which garners support from East and South Asia to the Middle East, to the oil and mineral-rich continent of Africa, the US must provide a robust vision of the future that is morally grounded in our own practice of an inclusive, forward-thinking society. It is our willingness to rely not only on our military superiority, but also our “soft power” to assist nations achieve security and prosperity based on a respect for individual rights and economic opportunity that will reassert America as a beacon of hope and a model to aspire to. As Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton once said, “Respecting rights isn’t choice leaders make day-by-day, it is the reason they govern”.

America has always been at its best when it has led by example and with humility rather than by dictate. President Obama and Secretary Clinton deserve to be commended for taking this high ground when it would have been politically convenient to play to our worst fears and stereotypes.

M. Osman Siddique is an American politician and former diplomat. He served as the United States Ambassador to the Republic of Fiji and to the Republic of Nauru, to the Kingdom of Tonga and to Tuvalu from 1999-2001. He was the US Ambassador during the 2000 Fijian coup d'état. Siddique is believed to be the second American-Muslim to be appointed as an Ambassador from the United States; the first was Robert D. Crane, appointed by President Ronald Reagan in 1981 as U.S. ambassador to the United Arab Emirates.

Ambassador Siddique has held many important board positions and currently holds a number of company directorships and advisory positions. In addition to his business activities, he has always been very active in his community. He has served on several Presidential delegations, including the White House Conference on Travel & Tourism, and the First Hemispheric Trade & Commerce Forum. He also served as a member of the National Democratic Institute's International Observer Delegation to the Bangladesh Parliamentary Elections in 1996. In 1999, he was the Co-Leader of the First Meeting of the Conference of the Pacific Community held in Tahiti. Served as Trustee to the Board of Bryant University, Providence, R.I. (1996-1999). In March 2000, President Bill Clinton invited Ambassador Siddique to join the Presidential entourage on its historic State visit to India and Bangladesh, as a member of his Cabinet Delegation. He was one of the Co-Chairs to the 2005 US-Islamic World Forum held in Doha, Qatar, jointly sponsored by the Brookings Institution and the Emir of Qatar.

Ambassador Siddique received his MBA from Indiana University in 1974. He and his wife, Catherine, have four children. They have been active and involved in many philanthropic and community based organizations. They live in McLean, Virginia.

Perspectives is a monthly opinion piece authored by leading practitioners and academics in the fields of public diplomacy and Arab media. The publication provides a forum to contextualize and analyze salient topics, concepts and developments that are of interest to the public diplomacy community as well as to Arab media followers. The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Layalina Productions, Inc.

Layalina Productions, Inc. helps bridge the divide between the Arab world and the United States by fostering cultural, educational, and professional dialogues through effective television programming and publications. Layalina is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation funded through tax-deductible donations from individuals and corporations, and through grants by foundations based in the U.S. and the Arab world. Please support Layalina by making a tax-deductible donation. Visit www.Layalina.tv or call 202-776-7761 for more information.