

OBAMA'S PATH PASSES THROUGH LEBANON

Obama chose to travel the road less travelled by recent US policies towards the Muslim world when he decided to deliver a speech in Cairo on 4 June. He set himself an enormous challenge: to transform Muslim public opinion so as to alter the impression that a US President is someone to throw shoes at rather than a potential partner for dialogue. Obama's ambitions were thus far-reaching and may have already had a political impact on some Middle Eastern events. This article will consider the Lebanese elections on 7 June and the political landscape they generated as the first milestone for the translation of US President's words into policy initiatives.

In Cairo, Obama leaned towards ideas that had been forgotten in recent years by the US administration. By announcing his intention to deliver a speech to the heterogeneous population that make up the world's one thousand million Muslims, he decided to bring some equilibrium to America's use of its different types of power. The Bush administration broke this balance by committing first and foremost to the use of military power through its interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The soft power of the US suffered from a serious backlash, engendering animosity among Muslims towards America.

To convince the world that America's diplomacy can be different to that of George W. Bush, Obama provided a strong case for the use of smart power, that is, a combination of hard and soft power as suggested by Joseph Nye. When addressing the situation in Afghanistan, he stated that 'we would gladly bring every single one of our troops home if we could be confident that there were not violent extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan determined to kill as many



Lebanese supporters of the Future movement of Saad Hariri wave flags as they celebrate the winning of Prime Minister Fuad Saniora and Education Minister Bahia Hariri at the parliamentary elections at a rally in Sidon, Lebanon, 8 June 2009.

Americans as they possibly can. But that is not yet the case. That's why we're partnering with a coalition of forty-six countries. And despite the costs involved, America's commitment will not weaken.'

Now Obama wants to set the ground for a 'new beginning' in Muslims' perceptions of the US, hence increasing incrementally America's use of soft power. In the light of the reactions to Obama's speech in various Arab and Muslim countries, this goal was well achieved. Even Fawzi Barhoum, a Hamas leader, acknowledged that Obama's speech was filled with 'soft diplomacy and compliments'.

Yet winning the hearts and minds of Muslim populations around the world requires more than promising speeches. Words will need to be translated into ac-

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tion and several spots in the Middle East, including Lebanon, require a new US approach.

The Lebanese elections were seen as a turning point for the consolidation of democracy in the Cedar country. Obama was said to have paved the way for the unexpected victory of the governing 14th March coalition, headed by Saad Hariri, which obtained 71 seats against 57 for the 8th March coalition, led by Hezbollah. The latter movement immediately recognised its defeat in the elections, which suggests that politics in Lebanon is moving away from its former logic of existential confrontation between sectarian parties.

The outcome of the elections obviously pleased Washington. The White House released a statement wishing that 'the next government will continue along the path towards building a sovereign, independent and stable Lebanon'. In a nutshell, if the Obama speech did influence these results, it may well be the first time in a long time that an American-backed coalition in the Middle East has won an election for this very reason – being aligned with the US.

But neither Obama's speech in Cairo nor the US reaction to the Lebanese elections have provided straightforward answers on the inclusion of political Islamist movements and American policies towards them.

Hezbollah performed well in the recent elections (its coalition actually now has one seat more than in the previous parliament) and, as a consequence, the balance of power in Lebanon remains largely unchanged.

In recent years Hezbollah has shown a shift in its own constituencies and its role within Lebanese politics. Although still firmly backed by Iran and Syria, Hezbollah has become a mainstream political party, abandoning its former commitment to exporting the Islamic revolution to Lebanon, and participating in the country's sectarian political system. It has also strengthened its resistance identity against Israel since the war of summer 2006, but it has done so in a bid to 'protect' the Lebanese sovereignty rather than pursuing pan-Islamic objectives. Hezbollah thus remains a political party with an armed wing, which gives it the status of the strongest political and military player in the country.

Paul Salem convincingly argued the need to establish a coalition government in Lebanon, regardless of the result of the elections.¹ For him, 'a stable government

¹ See Salem's 'Whoever wins this week's elections, Lebanon needs a coalition government'. <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=23198>

cannot proceed without a broad coalition' – the only political option to maintain a 'stabilizing middle ground preventing radical departures in policy'. If Hezbollah were to be marginalised from the new government, this could reinforce the movement's wish to form a destabilising opposition in Lebanon and reinvigorate its resistance identity.

Inclusion thus appears a key feature of Lebanon's future stability. This raises the dilemma of dialogue with groups that are still considered terrorist movements by the US administration, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian Territories.²

Washington has traditionally boycotted any action that would lead to the reinforcement of these groups' position in their respective political arenas. The US does not share some European countries' stance towards Hezbollah, whose leaders have restored contacts with the movement's political wing. Following such moves by the UK and France, EU High Representative Javier Solana has had recent contacts with Hezbollah's political wing in a bid to 'get to know Hezbollah better', acknowledging that the movement 'is part of political life in Lebanon and is represented in the Lebanese parliament'.

Solana's initiative raises uncertainty about Washington's next steps. In his speech in Cairo, Obama made it clear that America will commit to democratic processes held in the Muslim world. A caveat was introduced when he added that 'America respects the right of all *peaceful* and *law-abiding* voices to be heard around the world, even if we disagree with them. And we will welcome all elected, *peaceful* governments.' (Emphasis added.)

Hezbollah is likely to participate in the next Lebanese government even if it is not a peaceful, law-abiding movement and uses violence to achieve political ends. Let's recall, for example, that it last used force when it granted itself a veto power in the parliament after overrunning the Sunni neighbourhoods of Beirut a year ago.

So the US faces the following dilemma: should it remain reticent to Hezbollah's strong presence in the Lebanese government, potentially endangering political stability in Lebanon since Hezbollah's representation in the Lebanese parliament remains strong? Or should it rather shift its traditional approach towards Hezbollah and abandon Obama's promises to respect only peaceful and law-abiding voices?

² On Hamas, see Alvaro de Vasconcelos' ISS opinion piece 'Obama and the Palestinian question'. http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Obama_and_the_Palestinian_question.pdf

The Obama administration may wish to follow Solana's steps and consider Hezbollah an inescapable political actor in Lebanon. This would suggest the abandonment of former foreign policy premises for the region, while giving some concrete follow-up to the Cairo speech. Obama would act according to particular political configurations in Lebanon and would consider an approach to Hezbollah similar to that of the UK, which differentiates between its political and military wing. This is not a minor issue, based on its current inclusion in the US list of terrorist organisations, which puts forward policies to 'stigmatise and isolate designated terrorist organizations internationally'.

On the contrary, the Obama administration could also justify the continued isolation of Hezbollah on the premises that this is neither a 'peaceful' nor a 'law-abiding' movement. The maintenance of Hezbollah on the US terrorists list would follow, as would political moves to keep a pro-Western coalition in place without Hezbollah's participation in the government. This would undermine expectations about Obama's openness to key political Islamist movements in the region such as Hezbollah or Hamas.

An eventual shift in Obama's stance towards Hezbollah brings us to the geopolitical consequences of a policy of rapprochement. Some critics have argued that Obama's speech in Cairo was disconnected from the actual conundrum of Middle Eastern politics and the arenas of American interaction.

Firstly, a new Obama approach to movements such as Hezbollah or Hamas as suggested above would inevitably damage Washington's relations with Israel. These have already suffered a serious blow with the President's stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israel's settlement activities. Obama still believes that this may be a good time to launch a Middle East peace plan – even if Netanyahu's weak alliance has just

formed a government that is not ready to push forward a locally or internationally accepted Palestinian state.

Secondly, the contested re-election of Ahmadinejad has rebalanced optimistic interpretations of the 'win for the West' that the Lebanese elections represented. The official results make it hard to believe that Ahmadinejad's government will halt its financial and military support to Hezbollah, regardless of Washington's intentions to pursue dialogue with Iran on Middle Eastern security issues. The alliance with Hezbollah has traditionally aimed at reinforcing Tehran's geostrategic position in the region.

Thirdly, geopolitics also plays an important role in Syria's involvement in post-electoral Lebanon. Syria has been trying to reach equilibrium between its interference in Lebanese affairs and its dialogue with the new American administration. After Hezbollah's defeat, Syria may consider its interests in Lebanon at stake and may recall the need to enhance Hezbollah's position in a unity government. It may do so in order to delay progress by the international court on the assassination of Rafiq Hariri and the settlement of the disputed Shebaa Farms. In short, Damascus may want to use the Syria-Iran-Hezbollah axis to put pressure on the Obama administration.

Obama's projected path of a 'new beginning' of US' relations with Muslims around the world, and his aim of restoring US' soft power, have encountered their first dilemmas in Lebanon. The politics of inclusion of Islamist movements such as Hezbollah still lacks an official positioning that could represent a major shift in US policies towards the Middle East. The challenging road Obama has taken since his speech to the Muslim world somewhat depends on his ability to juggle with the complexities of the Lebanese political landscape. At stake is the success of Obama's first grand strategy in foreign policy.

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