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President Obama Versus Candidate Obama on the Middle East

In a 2008 campaign speech, then-presidential candidate Obama outlined how his Administration would act with respect to Israel and the rest of the Middle East. Soon after saying, “Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided,”¹ he made a variety of promises about Iran’s nuclear program and Middle East peace that have gone similarly unfulfilled under President Obama.

Obama claimed “diplomacy” will solve the Iran nuclear problem

- A key part of candidate Obama’s 2008 speech was a discussion of how his tough diplomacy would solve the problem of Iran’s illicit nuclear program.
- Senator Obama complained that the policies of President Bush made the United States and Israel “less secure.”
- As proof, he cited the fact that Iran “is now enriching uranium and has reportedly stockpiled 150 kilos of low enriched uranium.”
- If he were president, Obama said, he would “lead tough and principled diplomacy with the appropriate Iranian leader at a time and place of [his] choosing.”²

But Iran is accelerating its nuclear program

- Under President Obama’s policies, Iran has now stockpiled over 3,000 kg of low enriched uranium, more than one-and-a-half times the amount necessary to produce the final material needed in a nuclear bomb.³
- It has accelerated its enrichment of uranium over the last three years by every metric, installing more centrifuges, stockpiling more enriched uranium, and enriching uranium to higher levels.⁴

¹ Barack Obama, Speech to the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, June 4, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91150432>.

² Id.

³ Bipartisan Policy Center, Meeting the Challenge: Stopping the Clock, Feb. 2012, p. 21.

- As Senator Obama said in his 2008 speech, “Those are the facts, they cannot be denied.”

Candidate Obama said Russia and China would help on Iran

- Senator Obama said in his 2008 speech that he would pursue tough sanctions against Iran and that, under his diplomacy, Russia and China would join in strengthening sanctions against Iran. The contrary has been true.
- As recently as November 2011, President Obama said he expected China and Russia would “continue to cooperate and collaborate closely” on the Iran issue.⁵

But China and Russia have not yet cooperated with the U.S. against Iran

- Asserting that China and Russia will “continue” to cooperate on the Iran issue presupposes they have been cooperating to this point, which is belied by the facts.
- Secretary of State Clinton assessed at the beginning of 2011 that there are Chinese entities violating U.S. sanctions law.⁶
- After the November 2011 release of an International Atomic Energy Agency report detailing Iran’s extensive work on nuclear weapons, the New York Times summarized Russia’s position with its headline: “Russia Dismisses Calls for New U.N. Sanctions on Iran.”⁷

Candidate Obama talked tough on Iran

- In trying to frame himself as a strong ally of Israel, Senator Obama said he would “use all elements of American power to pressure Iran.”⁸

But President Obama fought sanctions every step of the way

- When Congress proposed in 2009 to strengthen the president’s authority to impose sanctions on Iran, the Obama Administration opposed the measure.
- The Senate version of what would become the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010 passed the Senate by voice vote, while the House version passed by a vote of 412-12.⁹
- The Administration continued to oppose the bill until the Conference Report passed the Senate 99-0 and the House 408-8.¹⁰

⁴ Joby Warrick, “U.N. Sees Spike in Iran’s Uranium Production,” Washington Post, Feb. 25, 2012; Stephen Rademaker and Blaise Misztal, “The Growing Threat of Iran’s Nuclear Program,” Washington Post, Nov. 7, 2011 (“[T]he true measure of Iran’s progress toward nuclear weapons capability is the rate at which it is producing enriched uranium, [and] . . . as IAEA reports demonstrate, Iran’s production of enriched uranium continues to accelerate.”).

⁵ Barack Obama, News Conference of the President at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum, Nov. 14, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/14/news-conference-president-obama>.

⁶ Hillary Clinton, Interview of the Secretary of State by George Stephanopoulos, Good Morning America, Jan. 18, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/01/154920.htm>.

⁷ Ellen Barry, “Russia Dismisses Calls for New U.N. Sanctions on Iran,” New York Times, Nov. 9, 2011.

⁸ Obama AIPAC speech, supra note 1.

⁹ 156 Cong. Rec. S324, Jan. 28, 2010; House Roll Call Vote No. 975, 111th Cong, 1st Sess., Dec. 15, 2009.

- Then, in October 2011, after it was revealed Iran was allegedly planning a terrorist attack on U.S. soil in which the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States was targeted for assassination, Congress sought to strengthen the president’s sanctions authority even further.
- This took the form of the Kirk-Menendez Amendment to the FY 2012 Defense Authorization Bill, an amendment the Senate passed by a vote of 100-0.¹¹
- The Obama Administration fought that effort too before eventually signing those sanctions into law as well.¹²
- Rather than pursuing tough sanctions against Iran, President Obama fought them every step of the way and has only been forced into sanctioning Iran by congressional action.

And his feeble implementation of sanctions has not achieved the desired result

- As an example of weak implementation, the Kirk-Menendez Amendment requires the president to take certain action within 60 days of enactment against foreign banks determined to be conducting financial transactions with the Central Bank of Iran. That requirement passed this week with no action from the president.¹³
- As for measuring results, President Obama’s Director of National Intelligence testified just last month it “is precisely the intelligence community view or assessment that to this point, the sanctions as imposed so far have not caused [Iran] to change their behavior or their policy.”¹⁴

Obama recognized the major threat to stability in the Middle East was Iran

- In his 2008 speech, candidate Obama rightfully recognized “there is no greater threat to Israel” than Iran.
- He went on to criticize “those who would lay all of the problems of the Middle East at the doorstep of Israel and its supporters, as if the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the root of all trouble in the region.”¹⁵

But then he focused blame not on Iran, but on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

- The president changed his tune within days of his swearing-in when George Mitchell was appointed Special Envoy for Middle East Peace to demonstrate the president’s “commitment to a negotiated ‘two-state solution.’”¹⁶

¹⁰ Senate Roll Call Vote No. 19, 111th Cong, 2nd Sess., June 24, 2010; House Roll Call Vote No. 394, 111th Cong, 2nd Sess., June 24, 2010.

¹¹ Senate Roll Call Vote No. 216, 112th Cong., 1st Sess., Dec. 1, 2011.

¹² FY 2012 National Defense Authorization Act §1245, Pub. L. No. 112-81, 125 Stat. 1298, 1646, Dec. 31, 2011.

¹³ Anne Gearan, Associated Press, “Fresh Iran Deadline Passes With No New Sanctions,” March 1, 2012.

¹⁴ James Clapper, Testimony of the Director of National Intelligence to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Hearing on Worldwide Threats, Jan. 31, 2012.

¹⁵ Obama AIPAC speech, supra note 1.

¹⁶ Congressional Research Service, Israel and the Palestinians: Prospects for a Two-State Solution, CRS Rpt. R40092, p. 1.

- President Obama then went to Cairo a few months later to argue the Arab-Israeli conflict had to be solved so that it could “no longer be used to distract the people of Arab nations from other problems.”¹⁷
- In August 2010, Secretary of State Clinton announced Middle East peace was to be “completed within one year.”¹⁸

Even the Arab Spring did not change the president’s focus

- When the Arab Spring was in full bloom in 2011, President Obama gave a speech ostensibly about this development, but the focus of the speech remained proposals for a comprehensive Middle East peace settlement.¹⁹
- In focusing attention on that, the Obama Administration seemingly blamed Israeli settlements as the primary reason there was not peace between the parties, as opposed to the constant Hamas terrorist attacks.
- Demonstrations across the region in support of universal freedoms show just how irrelevant the Obama Administration fascination with a comprehensive Middle East peace is to the issue of greater freedoms in the Middle East, namely the notion that greater liberalization in the Middle East could not come to pass until the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was solved.²⁰
- As CRS said, “Since taking office, President Obama has devoted greater time and attention to the pursuit of Middle East peace than to efforts to promote reform and democracy in the Arab world.”²¹
- This would seem to mean the Obama Administration has failed to cultivate and assist opposition groups committed to democratic ideals in order to help them become sufficiently organized so as to assist their succession to power in a post-Mubarak environment.
- The United States and supportive opposition groups must now play catch-up to this cause where the Muslim Brotherhood is commonly understood to be the best organized opposition group in Egypt at present.
- The overwhelming victory by Islamist parties in the November 2011 Egyptian parliamentary elections is evidence of this.²²

¹⁷ Barack Obama, Remarks of the President at Cairo University, June 4, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.

¹⁸ Hillary Clinton, Briefing of the Secretary of State on Middle East Peace, Aug. 20, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/08/146156.htm>.

¹⁹ Barack Obama, Remarks of the President on the Middle East and North Africa, May 19, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

²⁰ Robert Satloff, Testimony of the Executive Director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy to a House Committee on Foreign Affairs Hearing on Recent Developments in Egypt and Lebanon, Feb. 9, 2011, <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/112/sat020911.pdf> (noting “the absence of progress toward Israeli-Palestinian peace appears not to have been a factor in the popular unrest” in Tunisia and Egypt); Elliott Abrams, testimony at the same hearing, <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/112/abr020911.pdf> (noting democracy developments in the Middle East “should persuade us once and for all that the linkage argument—that every problem in the region is really tied to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—is false,” as none of the developments “had anything to do with Israel and the Palestinians”).

²¹ Congressional Research Service, Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations, CRS Rpt. RL33003, p. 8 (earlier versions, available at <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/156525.pdf>).

- Similarly, a fractured opposition in Syria is hindering the removal of President Assad from power.
- Instead of focusing upon a Middle East peace that can only be achieved by the parties if and when they want it, perhaps the Obama Administration should direct its efforts to supporting pro-democracy groups across the region with a favorable disposition toward the United States.

President Obama is scheduled to give a major address on Middle East affairs this Sunday, March 4. If his past speeches are any indication, this appearance will be full of rhetoric that quickly will be tossed aside in policy practice.

²² Islamist political parties, led by the Muslim Brotherhood, dominated the November 2011 elections for Egypt's People's Assembly, winning nearly 70% of the seats. Congressional Research Service, Egypt in Transition, CRS Rpt. RL33003, Feb. 8, 2012, p. 3