

Memo to the President

MEMORANDUM TO: President Barack Obama

DATE: July 7, 2009

SUBJECT: Your Middle East policy: refuse to be drawn

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Mr. President:

When you were a candidate for President you promised to extend the language of diplomacy toward the Middle East, exhibiting a political wisdom in which talking to people who are different than us would become normative. As President you are fulfilling that promise, and its irenic message is being well received by intended audiences. Your special video outreach to Iranians celebrating Nowruz, your speech in Ankara before the Turkish parliament, and your speech in Cairo are just three reminders. Many of us hope that more cooperative arrangements with the Muslim Middle East will arise over time from this changed direction in U.S. foreign policy. Yet ideologues and demagogues, at home and abroad, have their own hope. Agents of the foreign policy status quo, they want to choke off the new international mood. And to do that, they want to bait you. Refuse to be drawn.

Iran's Ahmadinejad has now accused you of interfering in his country's recent presidential elections. Yet you have been a model of restraint, respecting Iran's sovereignty while speaking firmly, yet in a way that has not added injury to the Iranian people. At great personal cost to themselves, they have been crying out to their political and religious leaders for more open and cooperative relations with the West. Any American who previously doubted the strong democratic will of the Iranian people need question it no longer. Ahmadinejad, however, reveals by his recent rhetoric a desire to prolong, if not worsen, adversarial relations between our two countries. Evidently, that suits his interests. Mr. President, refuse to be drawn.

Here at home, strong opposition voices in Washington and on talk radio decry your diplomatic outreach. This mulish stance didn't work for us in the spring of 2003, when the Bush administration froze out Tehran when it wanted to start serious talks, and it won't work now. The blowback from that decision has been considerable and has contributed to the regime's intransigence toward Washington. But as Moshe Dyan once said, "If you want to make peace you don't talk to your friends, you talk to your adversaries." Today's ideologues and demagogues in Iran and the United States seem to like the view from the precipice. They must be lonely there, for they give every indication of wanting the world to join them. Mr. President, refuse to be drawn.

The new international mood you are creating must be sustained if wiser U.S.-Middle East relations are to see their day. Style matters in foreign policy, as your own Dennis Ross has said, precisely because it affects the substance. Having begun wisely, Mr. President, keep going. Keep the doors open for talks, even should your Iran desk begin to differ. Not a few Iranian analysts interpret what is taking place as being the birth of a powerful new political front in Iran. The smartest move you could now make is to keep offering to talk. Which is what you are doing. The recent brutal crackdown by the regime in Tehran and the polemical opposition here at home will checkmate your promise only if you let it.

Changing U.S. policy toward the Middle East is, however, as you know, like trying to turn a supertanker around in the ocean during a storm. It takes a lot of patience, prudence, and concerted effort against forces of resistance. Unfortunately, that's the geopolitical weather today. Fortunately, it's still possible to turn the ship of state toward more cooperative arrangements with the Middle East. Mr. President, that means staying the course. There is no justifiable defense or honorable offense against the offer of improved relations.

(Charles Strohmer is an author, independent researcher, and visiting fellow of the Center for Public Justice. He is at work on a new book about wisdom-based approaches to U.S.-Middle East relations; see: [Wisdom or War?](#))

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