

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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President Obama, Vladimir Putin and the Middle East

In the April 2016 edition of *The Atlantic*, Jeffrey Goldberg offers one of the more insightful articles to date on President Obama's foreign policy—and, since his presidency is nearly over, his legacy. The article presents insights into the mind of President Obama found nowhere else. For me, one of the more valuable aspects of the article, which was based on a series of candid interviews Goldberg had with the president, is Obama's views of the Middle East. Goldberg summarizes Obama's perspective: "Obama has come to a number of dovetailing conclusions about the world, and about America's role in it. The first is that the Middle East is no longer terribly important to American interests. The second is that even if the Middle East were surprisingly important, there would still be little an American president could do to make it a better place. The third is that the innate American desire to fix the sorts of problems that manifest themselves most drastically in the Middle East inevitably leads to warfare, to deaths of US soldiers, and to the eventual hemorrhaging of US credibility and power. The fourth is that the world cannot afford to see the diminishment of US power." This extraordinary article confirms what I concluded nearly two years ago, namely that Obama has decided it is time for the US to disengage from the Middle East and play no significant role in trying to solve this region's intractable problems. It is certainly reasonable to conclude that the problems of the Middle East will not solve themselves and, if the US does not lead in this region, those problems will metastasize. For me, the greatest example of this is Syria, where there is increasing chaos and where Obama's worldview is significantly being tested—and challenged.

Vladimir Putin recently announced, quite surprisingly, that Russia was withdrawing most of its troops and aircraft from Syria. Andrew J. Tabler of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy has argued concerning Russian actions in Syria that "Syria doesn't have to be a slippery slope. Putin actually demonstrated you could intervene, bomb, put troops on the ground, and still get out. They effectively changed the situation on the ground, and kept the regime from collapsing." What was Putin doing in Syria and what were (still are?) his goals? There were roughly 4,000 Russian troops at its naval base (near Tartus) in Syria and the 50 combat aircraft at the airfield near Latakia it had constructed in Syria. (Russia has also fired cruise missiles from various positions on the sea and on the land, some at quite a distance from Syria.) Neil MacFarquhar of the *New York Times* has itemized six major goals Putin had for entering the Syrian civil war. He suggests that Putin has actually achieved these goals to one degree or another:

1. To thwart another Western attempt to push for leadership change in Syria and to fight the very idea of outside governments forcing political shifts.

2. To show that Russia is a more reliable ally than Washington, given that the Obama administration had abandoned long-term allies like former President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt when they faced political upheaval.
3. To restore to Russia the role it had in the Soviet era as an important actor in the Middle East and as a global problem solver, and to force respect for Putin as a world leader.
4. To shatter the isolation that Washington had tried to impose on Moscow after the crisis in Ukraine, forging a dialogue with the United States and, to a lesser degree, with Europe.
5. To distract attention from the war in Ukraine and to get lifted the economic sanctions imposed on Russia, which are hurting Russia in the face of its continuing economic problems.
6. To show the effectiveness of a new generation of weapons from Russia, the biggest arms exporter in the world after the United States.

It is important also to remember that Putin's withdrawal order does not mean total withdrawal. Russia will very much remain at its naval refueling and repair facility at Tartus. It will also keep its powerful S-400 air defense system in Syria to protect the forces staying behind. It also appears that Russia seeks to maintain Russian dominance of Syrian airspace.

President Obama has stated that Syria would be a Russian "quagmire," and that Russia's repeated resort to military force is a sign of weakness. Recent events indicate the fallacy of Obama's position. Syria will be no quagmire for Russia because Vladimir Putin is not in the business of nation-building. As the review of the six goals above has shown, Putin can shrewdly achieve his goals and emerge stronger than anyone thought possible. As *The Economist* argues, "Syria shows how, when Mr. Obama stands back in the hope that regional leaders will stop free-riding on American power and work together for the collective good, the vacuum is filled by disrupters like Iran and IS, and by Russia in its search for the next source of propaganda."

In Jeffrey Goldberg's article, Obama is characterized as a "gambler, not a bluffer." Goldberg writes that "The president has placed some huge bets . . . In the matter of the Syria regime and its Iranian and Russian sponsors, Obama has bet, and seems prepared to continue betting, that the price of direct US action would be higher than the price of inaction. And he is sanguine enough to live with the perilous ambiguities of his decisions." History will of course judge Obama's decisions and his "inaction" in much of the Middle East—but especially in Syria. By his inaction, has he permitted Iran and Russia to gain a significant foothold in this part of the Middle East that strong American engagement would have prevented? Will his inaction, which has permitted a more assertive Russia and Iran, someday actually pose a mortal threat to the existence of Israel, our strongest ally in the region? Has Obama's disengagement and inaction actually facilitated the rise of ISIS and the growing threat this terrorist caliphate poses to the region? I do not know the answers to these questions, but I do know that without American engagement and power as a check, nefarious forces fill that vacuum. It seems reasonable to me that Iran and Russia have filled that vacuum—and that portends for a more unstable future for the Middle East.

See Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," in *The Atlantic* (April 2016); *The Economist* ((19 March 2016), pp. 11, 21-23); and Neil MacFarquhar in the *New York Times* (16 March 2016).