



Obama is having mixed success on global security

By Avi Benlolo, Calgary Herald March 25, 2012

As America rumbles toward its presidential election, attention will begin to focus more sharply on the one question on everybody's mind: has President Barack Obama made the world safer?

Sure he has taken out Osama bin Laden - the most notorious terrorist of all time - as well as his colleague, Anwar al-Awlaki. He also blocked the Palestinian bid for unilateral statehood and succeeded in liberating Libya efficiently. But he has been coy on the Iranian issue, rebuffed Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu on several occasions (except the last), turned his back on the Arab Spring and left an emerging civil war in Iraq, while the Taliban is resurfacing in Afghanistan.

Still, Obama and his administration can take credit for reinforcing the successful referendum in South Sudan and for reaffirming the Ivory Coast's election results and securing the country last year.

While his position on Israel has been put to the test on several occasions, the president made one of the most well-informed and honest speeches at the last UN General Assembly, observing the following:

"Let us be honest with ourselves: Israel is surrounded by neighbours that have waged repeated wars against it. Israel's citizens have been killed by rockets fired at their houses and suicide bombs on their buses. Israel's children come of age knowing that throughout the region, other children are taught to hate them. Israel, a small country of less than eight million people, looks out at a world where leaders of much larger nations threaten to wipe it off of the map.

"The Jewish people carry the burden of centuries of exile and persecution, and fresh memories of knowing that six million people were killed simply because of who they are. Those are facts. They cannot be denied . . . The Jewish people have forged a successful state in their historic homeland. Israel deserves recognition."

Last fall, former New York mayor Ed Koch said he is "back on the Obama express bus for re-election" after these remarks. "His speech at the UN in support of Israel was extraordinary . . . I couldn't have made a better one myself."

Similarly, Alan Dershowitz recently wrote that Obama has turned a corner, referencing Jeffrey Goldberg's article in the Atlantic Magazine, where Obama says he is not "bluffing" about a military option against Iran. Dershowitz argues, however, there are marked differences between Israel and the U.S. over Iran and says he wants to hear the same words from Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, by Joint Chief of Staff Martin Dempsey and from others in the Obama administration, who he says are sending a different message to the Iranians.

A stark difference between the two allies is that Israel wants to prevent Iran from achieving the capability to produce a nuclear weapon, while Obama is promising to stop Iran from actually producing such a weapon.

In a scathing article in the Wall Street Journal, Dan Senor, the bestselling author of Start-Up Nation, argued that members of Obama's own party have questioned his statements and policies toward Israel, while not making a single visit to Israel (but visiting Cairo instead).

"In April 2010, 38 Democratic senators signed a critical letter to Secretary (Hillary) Clinton following the administration's public (and private) dressing down of the Israeli government," he noted, while pointing out the embarrassing and unforgettable Obama-Sarkozy open microphone gaffe in 2011, which caught part of a private conversation between Obama and French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Mr. Sarkozy said of Israel's premier, 'I can't stand Netanyahu. He's a liar.' Rather than defend Israel, Mr. Obama piled on, 'You're tired of him; what about me? I have to deal with him every day.' "

Obama's popularity slid this month from 50 to 41 per cent due to voter concern over gas prices and a potential war with Iran. His approval rating on foreign affairs has dropped from 50 to 40 per cent, although 58 per cent of respondents to the CBS/New York Times poll said they felt confident about his ability as commander in chief. In an earlier editorial, Democratic political pundit and CNN commentator Donna Brazile argued that "polls show the public backs Obama's pragmatic, resultsbased approach to foreign policy."

While it is true that Americans cannot stomach another war, are they willing to sacrifice global security? Many believe that Obama's foreign policy should be more resolute.

Pakistan teeters on the brink despite having a nuclear arsenal; North Korea's new 29-year-old supreme leader, Kim Jung-Un, is maintaining his nation's aggressive posture and America's relationship with Russia is frosty. At the same time, America finds itself at an impasse as China and Russia block any form of military action against Bashar al-Assad's brutal regime in Syria.

But all is not lost. Many Americans believe Obama should focus on internal matters like the economy, which is only now beginning to recover, and on health-care policy - otherwise known as Obamacare. Many Obama-generation Americans are asking if the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were, in the end, in the best interest of America, given the number of deaths and billions of dollars spent. For them, Obama's diplomacy, as it pertains to Iran in particular, is perhaps the lesser of two evils.

By focusing more on diplomacy, is Obama endangering not only Israel, but the future of western democracy? Can the world accept a nuclear Iran that will impose an everlasting threat on Europe and America?

A nuclear Iran is not only not in Israel's interest, it is also not in America's interest, diminishing its hegemony over the Middle East and beyond.

Has Obama made the world safer? History will judge.

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