

Obama as Global Social Worker

Gerald M. Steinberg, NGO-Monitor and Professor of Political Science, Bar Ilan University
September 25, 2013

No, this is not another Obama-bashing oped — quite the contrary. I count myself as an admirer of the US leader's oratory, as well as his determination to do the right thing. He is not locked into an ideological straight-jacket, but rather approaches each issue on its merits, looking for rational answers, confounding his rigid supporters on the Left, as well as angry opponents on the Right.

Indeed, Obama's speech before the General Assembly on Tuesday was another tour de force. When talking about the need to punish Syria, or responding to Iran's charm offensive, the President struggled with the complexities, seeing the potential costs and benefits of each option. Using the cadences and rational arguments of an inspirational professor, he forcefully denounced the immorality of tyrants, and demanded principled as well as effective responses from the United Nations and its member states (specifically Russia).

As a professor, I can identify with these struggles and complexities. But, despite these positive dimensions, I am unconvinced by Obama's arguments and job performance in dealing with the real world. The speeches notwithstanding, international relations and issues of war and peace are not his forte, and even in his fifth year as president, Obama makes the mistake of extending his previous experience to problems that are far outside this limited scope. This is a common problem, including for brilliant academics who assume that their expertise is unbounded and can be applied to every issue.

Before entering American politics, Obama's world was rooted in constitutional law and social work. As both Senator and President, his policies and speeches have continued to invoke the vocabularies, perspectives and tools from these professions. He shows no sign of differentiating between communities in conflict and domestic American agendas, on the one hand, and the power-based laws of gravity that govern relations between states, on the other hand. Thus, in his UN speech, he again spoke about the importance of engagement and dialogue with opponents. And, re-enacting the part of a constitutional law professor, Obama emphasized international agreements, enforcement mechanisms, and the duties of "the international community".

In contrast, international political realities, as exemplified by the behavior of Russia, China, Iran, Syria, and many others are far from reflecting a community united by common goals and norms. Obama's academic and political references omit basic texts in international politics, including the core observations of British political philosopher Thomas Hobbes (17th century). Hobbes wrote extensively on the "state of nature", in which every group seeks power and must defend its own vital interests, or risk annihilation by others doing the same. In this anarchy, weak states are swept away by stronger ones, often accompanied by mass killing and genocide. International institutions function only to the degree that they serve the interests of their powerful members, and international law is merely another arena for political conflict, lacking a duly constituted court system to ensure justice, or a consistent police force for enforcement. Unlike neighborhoods or even cities sharing a democratic framework, and can solve problems together, Obama's reliance on an "international community" is a dangerous illusion.

As a result, Obama's attempts at deterrence and his threats of punishment have failed. While he has repeatedly condemned the atrocities of the Syrian regime — particularly the August 21 chemical weapons attack that killed "more than 1,000 people, including hundreds of children" — his threats lack credibility. And although his appeal to Russian President Putin was eminently logical in a social-psychology framework — "let us remember that this is not a zero-sum endeavor. We are no longer in a Cold War", this is not in Moscow's Hobbesian vocabulary. From Obama's perspective, as he said in the UN, "There's no Great Game to be won, nor does America have any interest in Syria beyond the well-being of its people..." But Putin, as well as every Middle Eastern leader, speak an entirely different political language.

Similarly, while Obama repeated his insistence "that the Iranian government meet its responsibilities under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and UN Security Council resolutions", and offered a number of carrots, the stick that might lead to a last-minute policy change was largely hidden. Iran's new President is a master of charm and time-consuming diplomacy, as he proved ten years ago as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, when he ran circles around the Europeans. As a result, Obama hedged his bets, warning that "conciliatory words will have to be matched by actions that are transparent and verifiable", but these words are not matched by actions — a fatal flaw in a Hobbesian world.

In his UN speech, Obama also restated his faith in Israeli-Palestinian peace, declaring that "All of us must recognize that peace will be a powerful tool to defeat extremists, and embolden those who are prepared to build a better future." This is

another eminently logical conclusion, but it is not backed by the day to day realities of Palestinian

terror, incitement and wider Jihadist threats. In today's Middle East, a Palestinian state could quickly become a failed state and yet another base for the "extremists" whom Obama imagines as defeated.

It is in a spirit of constructive criticism that I offer these observations. By now, Obama has probably realized that words, regardless of their eloquence and inspirational impact, are not the same as decisions on the most difficult issues of war and peace. With over three years remaining in his second term, each of the global threats addressed in the President's latest speech will require decisions involving major risks, including the risk of doing nothing. To avoid failure and a legacy of disaster, the myths of an "international community" and self-enforcing international rules must be replaced by the recognition of global realities.

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