

WHY OBAMA IS GOOD FOR THE MIDDLE EAST*

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The next years in the Middle East will be tumultuous, and this calls for a nuanced American approach vis-à-vis the different regional players. While Obama's Mideast policies during his first term were occasionally misguided and unfocused, he certainly is better equipped to face these regional challenges than Mitt Romney.

With the complex situation followed by the Arab Awakening, America needs to reach out to the Moslem and Arab world. It should be adamant in opposing extremist religious fanaticism while being firm in protecting its strategic and economic interests: but it should not launch a war, ideological or strategic, against Islam as such. With his Manichaeic world-view, Romney would have been incapable of such a differentiated approach. Obama has tried to suggest such opening in his Cairo speech; even if there was no follow up and his initial response to the demonstrations on Tahrir Square was confused, he understands how important this is. He is also well aware of the pitfalls of a more active involvement in the Syrian imbroglio.

Similarly, if it turns out that diplomacy will fail to stop Iran's nuclear ambitions and more robust steps will have to be taken, Obama will have the legitimacy, internal and international, to do this. Unlike Romney, he cannot be branded as a gung-ho war monger.

Obama has also learned how complicated is the road to an Israeli-Palestinians understanding: in his second term, he may try to learn from the failure of his initial attempts to achieve a quick fix. With his simplistic views on the conflict, Romney had no chance of getting anywhere on this.

And there is another aspect to it. As all Israeli security experts agree, despite disagreements between Obama and Netanyahu on Israeli settlements on the West Bank, the security cooperation between the two countries has reached unprecedented levels in the last few years. With Israeli elections set for January 22, 2013, some things may also change when a new Knesset will be elected. And in any case, it is good for the Jewish state to have even a sometimes critical friend in the White House, supported by Western liberal opinion, than being identified with what Romney and his right-wing supporters stand for.

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