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US and the Middle East: PR fiasco looms for Obama

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

President Obama faces a public relations disaster in the Arab and Muslim world next month with his expected rejection of recognition of Palestinian statehood by the United Nations General Assembly. Obama could do much to restore his country's image and reaffirm the US as a player despite its unpopular policies.

Commentary

COME SEPTEMBER the United States will face a major public relations disaster in its Middle East policy when the UN General Assembly (UNGA) votes on Palestinian statehood. President Obama has vowed to oppose UN recognition of a Palestinian state within the borders prior to the 1967 war when Israel captured and occupied the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza.

Although the UNGA is certain to grant the recognition by an overwhelming majority, the US has pledged to veto UN Security Council endorsement of the resolution. That will go against US claims that it favours the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel with boundaries based on the pre-1967 borders.

Credibility Problem in US Mid-East Policy

While the US veto will prevent Palestine from becoming a member of the UN, it will give it a kind of legal status currently enjoyed by Taiwan and Kosovo whose memberships in the world body have been blocked by China and Russia respectively. Moreover, recognition by the UN Assembly will affirm the pre-1967 borders as the legal boundaries of Palestine that was implicit in failed Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

While the UN declaration of a Palestinian state will be a triumph for its president Mahmoud Abbas, it will be a public relations failure for Obama in the Middle East and North Africa. It will reinforce the perception that Washington is beholden to Israel notwithstanding Obama's outreach efforts towards the Arab and Muslim world.

Ironically, Palestine's newly acquired legal status could prove advantageous to Obama's efforts to nudge Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to return to the negotiating table. Obama failed earlier this year to persuade Netanyahu to explicitly acknowledge the pre-1967 borders as the basis for a settlement. While he stopped short of rejecting Obama's position, Netanyahu sought instead to strike a deal with Abbas involving Palestinian recognition of the Jewish character of the State of Israel in exchange for his acknowledgement of the pre-1967 borders.

Since the Palestinians have already conceded recognition of Israel as a state, Netanyahu's demand is unacceptable to Abbas because it would undermine the position of Palestinians with Israeli citizenship and the right to return for refugees who were forced to flee when Israel was established in 1948.

Communications failure

Obama needs a communications strategy to explain his administration's position especially the dichotomy between its declared support for a Palestinian state and its rejection of the UN resolution, which threatens to reduce the diminished credibility of the US to tatters. Washington's credibility problem in the Middle East and North Africa stems only partly from US policies, including its unqualified backing of Israel. It also stems from the US failure to back popular uprisings wholeheartedly, as well as its perceived military weakness exemplified by its inability to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan or force out Libyan leader Colonel Gaddafi.

The image of the US as a fumbling superpower arises from the fact that it has failed at the one thing it counts among its strengths: displaying a degree of transparency and accountability that would allow it to dominate the information game, manage expectations and massage the facts when its policies do not always square with the high standards it sets for others. To achieve that, the Obama administration would have to rejig its efforts to win Muslim hearts and minds that it launched with the president's widely acclaimed speech in Cairo in June 2009.

Such rejigging would have to involve a concerted effort to engage with Middle Eastern and North African media, consistently and persistently, to explain US policy as well as how US policy making works. US officials have yet to hold a briefing for Arab journalists on US attitudes towards the anti-government protests sweeping the region. US officials, including Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, appear regularly on US news channels but only rarely on Middle Eastern or North African media outlets.

The failure to engage with regional media is in stark contrast to the US media campaign in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington when the US established media hubs in Dubai, Brussels and London staffed with fluent Arabic speakers. The administration was equally effective with its use of Twitter and YouTube to broadcast Obama's Cairo speech.

Arab Public Opinion

Against the backdrop of the region's struggle for greater political freedom, the US would benefit from engaging in an open and transparent debate of its policies instead of simply issuing declarative statements to regional media. US officials go to great lengths to explain the nuances of their policies to the US media. However Middle Eastern and North African journalists, the very communicators needed to create an understanding of US policy, are excluded from those briefings.

Engaging with regional journalists may not convince Arab public opinion of the moral justification of US policy, but would at least go a long way to dispel conspiracy theories and prejudices prevalent in Arab media. It would help shape understanding of and in-depth reporting on US policies and avert unpopular positions becoming destructive PR fiascos.

Moreover it would position the US as a power willing to engage rather than impose its views. The Arab world may well disagree with its policies but would have a more nuanced understanding of the reasoning that informs those policies.

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