



## Barack Obama's Foreign Policy Towards Middle East in the Changing Geopolitical Landscape: A New Path for Peace and Stability in the Region

Muhammad Fayyaz\*

Lecturer in History, Government College No.1 D.I.Khan KP Pakistan

**\*Corresponding Author:** Muhammad Fayyaz, Lecturer in History, Government College No.1 D.I.Khan KP Pakistan

**Abstract:** Barack Obama's foreign policy towards Middle East was based on pragmatic approach. The aim of his foreign policy was to bring peace and stability in the region and to keep America's geostrategic influence in the regions through force of diplomacy and engagement. Obama's regime engaged with Iran over its nuclear and shunned confrontationist attitude with Iran. He believed that engagement with Iran was pivotal for America's geopolitical interest in the Middle East. He was well aware about social and political realities of Middle East and that's why he adopted that approach which was more suitable for the stability and development of the region. He wanted a real change in the Middle East in the sphere of politics, economics and social development. He broke with traditional foreign policy approach of the US establishment that had been prevailed since decades. He wanted to engage Arabs themselves in the shaping of peaceful and stable Middle East, and conveyed his message to them that they must not overwhelmingly be dependent on United States for mending their problems. Obama realized America's pivot to Asia demands a new diplomatic attitude towards Middle East.

**Keywords:** Nuclear Deal; Diplomacy; Sectarianism; Containment; Engagement; Extremism; Peace.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

When Barack Obama came to power in 2009 he inherited a messy legacy of two wars of Afghanistan and Iraq, and a worsened financial crisis of 2008. United States was no longer a status quo power at international level. The rise of the multipolar world put constraints on US power globally that forced her to bring changes in her strategies to cope with the dynamics of changing geopolitical scenario of the world. Owing to the rise of Imperial China, Russia and India, a consensus developed in Washington to focus strategic priorities on Asia. The rise of China was regarded as a threat to US hegemony in the Asia-Pacific. Hillary Clinton, then Secretary of State, said: "One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment\_ diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise\_ in the Asia-Pacific region."<sup>1</sup> The Asia-Pacific now replaced Middle East as a strategic priority of US administration. When America was shifting her strategy to Asia, she was also very much engaged to restore order in Afghanistan and Iraq where wars had not yet finished and prospect of peace was stark. US spent \$4 trillion on Afghanistan war while the cost of Iraq war soared up to \$6 trillion, and despite that there was no prospect of peace in these war torn states.<sup>2</sup> The chaos in these war torn states damaged the power projection of US.

Obama's doctrine towards Middle East was a response to the pressing challenges US power faced globally. US was no longer interested to involve in the costly conflicts of Middle East. US 'pivot' to Asia was to counter balance China's growing maritime power in the Asia-Pacific. The loss of Asia-Pacific to China means the end of US as an international power. For a long time US was a hegemon power in East Asia, given her advance and unmatched naval and air power, and after collapse of

<sup>1</sup>Hilary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century", *Foreign Policy*, October, 2011. Retrieved from <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>

<sup>2</sup>John J. Mearsheimer and Stephan. M. Walt, "The Case of Offshore Balancing: A Superior US Grand Strategy", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol, 95, July/Aug 2016 , 77

U.S.S.R., US naval and air units conducted reconnaissance missions not only in East Asia but also within the Chinese airspace and territorial water with impunity.<sup>3</sup> But China eventually balanced her power against US, owing to her impressive economic development since 1980's. China shored up her military budget in the start of this century and in 2009 her total military spending reached to \$150 billion. It developed more sophisticated land-based ballistic missiles and cruise missiles, J-20 stealth fighters, drones and submarines which put in peril the US hegemony in East Asia. Owing to her sophisticated military technology, China in the future would tilt the power in her favour in the East Asia.<sup>4</sup> Now, "powerful radar lights up American, Japanese, and other ships that patrol the Western Pacific. Cutting edge satellites peer down from space to make them for potential targeting".<sup>5</sup> China has also been actively engaged to strengthen her power in the Indian Ocean by building a port projects in Burma, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and in Somalia. Further, through 'One Belt, One Road (OBOR) project, which China started in 2014 with the total worth of \$40 billion, will connect China with Central Asians states and Europe through network of roads. Through OBOR China would have easy access to mineral resources both in Central Asia and Middle East. In 2013 China trade with the Central Asian states reached to \$50 billion.<sup>6</sup>

Another power that revived her imperial strength is Russia, which under the leadership of Putin, emerged as strong military power. Russia possess imperial mentality and remained an imperial power for centuries and the breakdown of U.S.S.R was just a bad episode in her long imperial history. It started to modernize her military built up in 2008 to project her power beyond the shores. Putin challenged the status quo power of US and jealously guarded the former satellite states of Eastern Europe from the intrusion of NATO. When Russia occupied Georgia in 2008 and sensed that NATO was creating security problem in Georgia, "Moscow resumed air patrols off the coasts of Europe and North America and sent bombers and Navy ships on missions to Venezuela."<sup>7</sup> It was a clear message that anyone who would meddle in the security interest of Russia would not be tolerated. Putin regained control over the former satellite states both in Central Asia and Eastern Europe in an indirect way: "to build a Pharonic network of energy pipelines, helped politician in neighboring countries in various ways, ran intelligence operations, and used third parties to buy control of local media."<sup>8</sup> Russia also showed much concern on the Middle East political crisis and was critical of US role in creating chaos by waging war in Iraq. Putin said US skewed policies accelerated the race for nuclear arms and growth of Al-Qaeda and ISIS in Middle East. Russia feared the rise of Islamic militancy in Middle East would help spread of militancy in Central Asia which could create a formidable security challenges for her. In 2015 Putin sent military for the support of Bashar Asad's regime, which was losing ground to the heavy assaults of ISIS, and helped him to manage the defeat of ISIS and altered the strategic balance in Syria.

Obama's doctrine of Middle East was not bound to fix ideological doctrine; but rather was based on realism. He wanted to get long term strategic interests in the region. His agenda of foreign policy towards Middle East was based on promoting peace and development. He relied more on diplomacy over force. Obama believed in the policy of off-shore balance as a viable strategy in Middle East. Having learnt a bitter experience from the hawkish interventionist policies of George W. Bush, Obama adopted pragmatic non-interventionist policies. Further, He did not want to damage America's larger interest in Middle East for the sake of her traditional allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel. He struck nuclear deal with Iran despite facing severe criticism from the strong lobbies of above two

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<sup>3</sup>Aaron. L. Friedberg, *A Contest For Supremacy: China, America and Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company: 2011), 217

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 2018

<sup>5</sup>Elias Groll and Dan De Luce, "China is Fuelling Submarine Arm Race in the Asia Pacific", *Foreign Affairs*, Aug. 26, 2016 Retrieved from <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/26/china-is-fueling-a-submarine-arms-race-in-the-asia-pacific/>

<sup>6</sup>William. T. Wilson, "China's Huge 'One Belt, One Road' Initiative is Sweeping Central Asia," *The National Interest*, July 27, 2016 Retrieved from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/chinas-huge-one-belt-one-road-initiative-sweeping-central-17150?page=show>

<sup>7</sup>Dmitri Trenin, "Russia Reborn: Reimagining Moscow's Foreign Policy", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 88, No.6, Nov-Dec 2009, 70

<sup>8</sup>Robert D. Kaplan, "Eurasia's Coming Anarchy: The Risk of Chinese and Russian Weakness", *Foreign Affairs*, March-April 2016, 34

states. His approach was based more on gaining the trust of friends and foes through mutual respect, mutual cooperation and engagement. He did not fall prey to hubris and realized power must be exercised with conscious and restraints. For him “Real power means you can get what you want without having to exert violence.”

He made clear US would not interfere in the internal matters of Middle Eastern states and would not take the sole responsibility for ending civil wars or putting off the flames of sectarianism and extremism; but it would be a shared one. US could put a lid on crisis through her military muscle for a time being but the moment it would take its hands off the situation would get further worsened and that's why he stressed that unless Arabs themselves are committed for creating stability, resolve sectarian violence and civil wars then peace and stability would be an unachievable dream. He realized that bringing peace, order and stability in the Middle East was a complex issue and that to deal with it needed a broad based strategy in which Arabs have to take much more responsibility in the process. He found conventional US foreign policy toward Middle East as lacking in wisdom and rationality.

## **2. OBAMA'S IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL: THE RENEWAL OF US HEGEMONY IN MIDDLE EAST**

Barack Obama gave priority to develop trust based foreign relations with Iran. Obama realized that for a larger imperial interest of US in the Middle East, it was vital for US to reach out to Iran. Further, the US administration 'pivot' to Asia increased geopolitical importance of Iran. The reason was that Iran emerged as strong stakeholder in reshaping the political order of Middle East after the collapse of Iraq and Syria. Iran has an imperial mentality which is rooted in her statecraft since antiquity and is one the strong state in a real sense in the Middle East because “Iranians are blessed with a cultural self-certainty comparable to that of the Indians and Chinese”.<sup>9</sup>Iran has much leverage in the shia community all across Middle East, which is deeply divided along sectarian lines. It was a challenging task for Obama to develop a strategic understanding with Iran and restore trust level between Washington and Tehran, given the decades of strain relations between them. The reason was that US needed Iran to restore order in Iraq and Syria, to counter Al-Qaeda both in Middle East and Afghanistan, and in future to counter China in the Persian Gulf.<sup>10</sup>The US 'pivot' to Asia increased for her the geopolitical importance of Iran. Through a strategic partnership with Iran, US could counter Russia and China in the Central Asia, and China in the Indian Ocean.

The thorny issue that prevented US from rapprochement with Iran was the quest of latter to acquire nuclear bomb. Iran quest for nuclear bomb increased after the Bush invasion of Iraq, which created chaos in Middle East. Iran felt her survival in peril when Bush regime placed Iran as the next possible target of US military might. In 2002, G. W. Bush placed Iran in the list of states of “axis of evil”. Although Iran was not involved in the inhuman terrorist attack of 9/11 and her leaders vehemently condemned those attacks and expressed condolence with American people. Like USA, Iran was also against Taliban and continued to support Northern Alliance in Afghanistan to overthrow Taliban government, and helped Western Powers in setting post-Taliban political arrangement in Afghanistan. But despite that America did not bring some softness towards Iran; and then again Iranian felt “snubbed, misunderstood and letdown by the Westerners they think should have been their friends.”<sup>11</sup>

In 2002, undeclared nuclear sites were found in the regions of Arak and Natanz. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 2005 declared that Iran was not complying with obligations of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). America and Israel put pressure on Iran to dismantle the nuclear sites and warned military action. The military threats emboldened nationalist feeling in Iran and Iranians supported their leadership to acquire nuclear power ever at the peril of her existence.<sup>12</sup>However, the threats and sanction could not prevent Iran from making nuclear infrastructure clandestinely, and “the historical record indicates that a country bent on acquiring nuclear weapons can rarely be dissuaded from doing so. Punishing a state through economic sanctions

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<sup>9</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, “The Ruins of Empire in The Middle East”, *Foreign Policy*, May. 25, 2015 Retrieved From <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/25/ruins-of-empire-in-the-middle-east-syria-iraq-islamic-state-iran/>

<sup>10</sup>Robert D. Kaplan, “Warming To Iran”, *The Atlantic*, Jan/Feb. 2015 Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/01/warming-to-iran/383512/>

<sup>11</sup> Michael Axworthy (2007) *Iran: Empire of the Mind*. (Allan Lane: Penguin Books, 2007), 289

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 295-96

does not inexorably derail its nuclear program.”<sup>13</sup> In 2003 Iran had 130 nuclear centrifuges and in 2013 it reached to 19,000 and acknowledged it possessed seven tons of low enriched uranium; and Iran developed all that in clandestine despite the sanctions and war threats by US.<sup>14</sup> Obama adopted a different strategy towards Iran that eventually broke the stalemate between Washington and Tehran. He leaned more on engagement and negotiations along with putting pressure and sanctions to agree Iran on dismantling nuclear program. He did not regard Iran as an evil power, and gained trust of Iran's leadership by engaging with them wholeheartedly. Eventually in 2015, he succeeded in agreeing Iran's pragmatic leader Hassan Rouhani to a historic nuclear agreement. US involved permanent members of United Nations Security Councils\_ China, Russia, France and Britain\_ and Germany (P5+ 1) in that historic deal.

According to treaty, Iran could develop nuclear energy for her civil friendly energy demands; it would disband the entire clandestine nuclear program, it would give up around 14000 of its 20000 centrifuges, it would give up all but 300 kilograms of her enormous stockpile of 10000 kilograms of enriched uranium, it would allow IAEA to monitor her nuclear program and entire supply chain of uranium on regular basis, and it would develop nuclear energy under the vigilant supervision of United Nations. The one preamble of the Vienna treaty stated: “The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will be requested to monitor and verify the voluntary nuclear-related measures as detailed in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The IAEA will be requested to provide regular updates to the Board of Governors, and as provided for in this JCPOA, to the UN Security Council. All the relevant rules and regulations of the IAEA with regard to the protection of information will be fully observed by all parties involved.”<sup>15</sup>

The nuclear deal gained its objective by compelling Iran's leadership to renounce their efforts for nuclear bombs, and what previous US regimes could not subvert efforts of Iran's nuclear weapons by threats and heavy sanctions Obama achieved it through diplomatic outreach. After the nuclear deal “the cooperation that Iran has shown in decommissioning its enrichment centrifuges, removing the core of its heavy water reactor and shipping out most of its low enriched uranium stockpile has surprised arm controllers.”<sup>16</sup> Iran met the obligation set by JCPOA and removed the nuclear material accordingly. “Iran was able to dismantle two-third of its centrifuges and ship out 97 percent of its low enriched uranium (LEU) by January 2016. Meanwhile, Iran has submitted to an unprecedented inspections and verification regime that makes it extraordinary difficult for it to pursue a meaningful covert program.”<sup>17</sup>

Obama broke with the conventional foreign policy approach of his predecessors that regarded Iran as inherent evil power that was not worthy to be negotiated with. American leadership kept an uncompromising attitude with Iran since Iranian Revolution of 1979. Since then America endeavored to isolate and weaken it and presented it as bad state that did not deserve any soft attitude. After the collapse of USSR in 1991, USA created new ideological enemies and now that time Iraq and Iran were selected as focus of attention and were regarded inherently evil states like the way once Soviet Union was regarded so. “The Soviet model helped also to produce the policy that was called Dual containment\_ the idea that Iraq and Iran should be regarded as inherently hostile, to be contained and sanctioned rather than negotiated with.”<sup>18</sup> The relation between United States and Iran turned hostile and both regarded each other as evil powers, and that attitude was based on stereotypes; and thus diplomatic moves for mutual understanding and negotiation ended in impasse.

Obama knew that sanctions and war was not the solution to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. He said in one of his interview with Thomas L. Friedman: “We know that a military strike or a series of military strikes can set back Iran's nuclear program for a period of time\_ but almost certainly will

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth.N Waltz (2012) “Why Should Iran Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing would mean Stability” *Foreign Affairs*, July-August, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (London: Penguin Books, 2014 ), 162

<sup>15</sup> *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*, Vienna 14<sup>th</sup> July, 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/245317.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> “The Iran Nuclear Deal: Big Days Imminent, Big Problems Ahead”, *The Economist*, Jan 6, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Ilan Goldenberg and Elizebeth Goldenberg, “A Year Later Iran Deal is Alive and Well”, *The National Interest*. July. 15. 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of Islamic Republic*. (Allan Lane: Penguin Books, 2014).

prompt Iran to rush towards a bomb, will provide an excuse for the hard-liners inside of Iran to say, 'This is what happens when you don't have a nuclear weapon: America attacks.'<sup>19</sup>

### **3. OBAMA'S SYRIA POLICY: TO CONTROL THE DISORDER**

Obama fundamental approach towards Syria was to save her from disorder and chaos. He regarded ISIL as a real cause of disorder not only in Syria but in Iraq as well. "A principal tenet of realism is that disorder is worse than injustice, since injustice merely means the world is imperfect, whereas disorder can mean there is no justice for anyone."<sup>20</sup> When Assad regime in 2012 used chemical weapons against its opponents then it caused mass casualties, and brought uproar at international level. There started a growing pressure on Obama not only from his administration but also from conservative political circles to take that issue seriously and punish Assad regime for crossing the limits. For them, the root cause of all Syrian crises was Assad's autocrat rule, and if he happened to be removed from power then a stable Syria could be envisioned. John Kerry, then Secretary of State, on 30 August 2013 advocated for a stern action against Assad, and said he must be given exemplary. American close allies like British, and France were expecting a military action from Obama and were supporting interventionist policies.<sup>21</sup> His security advisors team was sure there was no reason that could prevent President to take military action.

However, Obama had pursued a strategy that was altogether different strategy. He delivered a speech on 10 September 2013 at White House about his strategy on Syria issue. He said, given that Assad regime committed a crime of gassing to death over a thousand people and the images of those who massacred were sickening, given that he was a repressive autocrat, who clamped down on peaceful protesters and his regime caused a civil war in Syria that resulted in the death of over 100,000 people and millions fled the country, but despite all that he would not remove dictator with force and he made clear: "I will not put American boots in Syria. I will not pursue an open ended action like Iraq and Afghanistan. I will not pursue a prolonged air campaign like Libya or Kosovo."<sup>22</sup> He said he would order for limited military targeted strikes "to deter Assad from using chemical weapons, to degrade his regime's ability to use them, and to make clear to the world we will not tolerate their use." Obama said he would take Congress into confidence for these limited targeted strikes. Further, he said he would seek cooperation of Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, to force Assad to give up chemical weapons. And that diplomatic move, according to Obama, had achieved the goal to pressurize Assad to dismantle chemical weapons without resorting to force. That speech spells out his foreign policy agenda. First it was based on non-interventionist: US would not interfere in foreign lands unless the threat is existentialist and grave. He did not want to engage US military in land wars in Middle East.

He did not want to plunge America in the costly wars anymore. He was criticized by the foreign-policy establishment for showing pacifist attitude. In response to that Obama said in his interview to James Goldberg: "There is a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow. It's a playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment. And the playbook prescribes responses to different events, and these responses tend to be militarized responses. When America is directly threatened, the playbook works. But the playbook can also be a trap that can lead to bad decisions. In the midst of an international challenge like Syria, you get judged harshly if you don't follow the playbook, even if there are good reason why it does not apply."<sup>23</sup> He realized if Assad be removed from power by force the situation in Syria would turn into a worst anarchy and the state would

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<sup>19</sup>Thomas L. Friedman, "Iran and The Obama Doctrine", *The New York Times*, April 5, 2015. [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/06/opinion/thomas-friedman-the-obama-doctrine-and-iran-interview.html?smid=tw-share&\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/06/opinion/thomas-friedman-the-obama-doctrine-and-iran-interview.html?smid=tw-share&_r=0)

<sup>20</sup>Robert D. Kaplan, "America's Assad Quandary", *The National Interest*, October, 2016. Retrieved from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/americas-assad-quandary-18078?page=show>

<sup>21</sup>Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine: The U.S President Talks through his Hardest Decisions about America's Role in the World", *The Atlantic*, April 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

<sup>22</sup>Barack Obama, "Full Transcript: President Obama's Sep. 10 Speech on Syria", *The Washington Post*, Sep. 10, 2013 Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/running-transcript-president-obamas-sept-10-speech-on-syria/2013/09/10/a8826aa6-1a2e-11e3-8685-5021e0c41964\\_story.html?tid=ss\\_fb&utm\\_term=.d450570407f2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/running-transcript-president-obamas-sept-10-speech-on-syria/2013/09/10/a8826aa6-1a2e-11e3-8685-5021e0c41964_story.html?tid=ss_fb&utm_term=.d450570407f2)

<sup>23</sup> Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine".

become a breeding ground for terrorists. The case of Iraq was before him. Given Saddam was a dictator and there was no democracy in Iraq, given he kept the country in peace with iron hand but there existed a state and everything was under his control. During his rule there was no ISIL in Iraq and if there was any then it was too weak and the sectarian issues between Shia and Sunni were under control.

Obama made clear ISIL was a real threat both to the peace of Middle East and US interest there. He ordered for a selected military strikes against ISIL. Thus, tacking the menace of extremism was his priority. Russia entered into Syria crisis because of her own interests. Russia was a close ally of Syria since decades. Putin regarded the rise of ISIL as a threat to Russia as it could fan to fine Islamic militancy in Central Asia and even in Russia. Assad was a close ally to Putin and the later could not see the collapse of Syria. When Russian force entered into Syria the world looked curiously to the response of US response. Obama did not support rebel groups in Syria against Assad and his close allies. He did not want US to engage in costly war of Syria, and confined his approach to just target ISIL. He said to his critics, who were labeling him as pacifist, that how could US engage in the war of Syria when it had not yet finished the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that were still causing economic strain. Obama was right that America could not bring order in Afghanistan and Iraq despite spending billions of dollars and still both states were under the grip of insurgencies. Pointing to Syrian issue he said: "any thoughtful president would hesitate about making a renewed commitment in the exact same region of the world with some of the exact same dynamics and the same probability of an unsatisfactory outcome."<sup>24</sup>

Obama was criticized from both within his party circle and also by conservative foreign policy experts for not taking tough actions against Assad, and also for not supporting those groups who were against Assad. Hillary Clinton said that the pacifist attitude on the part of Obama was responsible for the creation of ISIS in Syria. The ISIS, she believed, emerged due to power vacuum that created as a result of civil war. Thus, if Obama had supported opposition group that was comprised of different shades of people like Islamists, seculars, engineers and other middle class people then ISIL could not have emerged as a stronger group. Further, she criticized over cautious and reluctant attitude of Obama and said that the leaders who adopt passive attitude could not make better decisions. She, like Henry Kissinger, advocated aggressive and belligerent projection of power to achieve desired foreign policy objectives in Syria. She did not like Russian interference in Syria and advocated for an aggressive policy in Syria to deter Russian influence there.<sup>25</sup> She related Putin with Hitler, and considered Assad as a real threat to the peace and stability of Syria, and preferred use of force against him. The idea of moderate group in Syria she supported that could be able to topple Assad was nothing less than a wishful thinking. The ISIS was very strong organization which received hundreds of millions dollars from those powers that wanted to remove Assad at any price and these powers were also close allies of US. The situation in Syria was complex in nature and it seemed out of control even for the US. The reason was that multiple powers were engaged to extend their area of influence. The close US allies generally supplied weapons and funds to extremist groups in Syria and that further strengthened ISIL. That was the reason Obama was suspicious of the loyalty of Arab powers.

Henry Kissinger criticized Obama's approach as passive, and lacked visionary approach in a sense that he focused more on short-term results. Kissinger said that Obama did not formulate policies on the basis of broader realist spectrum. Kissinger wanted to see America as a leading power to shape world order according to its interests. This could only happen when US engaged in quixotic military adventures. Kissinger policy towards Middle East was conventional one and his view was also shared by foreign policy establishment; and he wanted to apply cold war tactics to secure US interest and for to bring peace in the Middle East. He supported Iraq war of 2003 and lauded Bush courage for crusading democracy through military muscle. He later acknowledged "Implementing a pluralist democracy in place of Saddam Hussein's brutal rule proved infinitely more difficult than the overthrow of the dictator."<sup>26</sup> US invasion helped collapsing the social fabric of state and out of the

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<sup>24</sup>Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine".

<sup>25</sup>Jeffrey Golderg, "Hillary Clinton: Failure to Help Syrian Rebels Led to the Rise of ISIS". *The Atlantic*, Aug. 10, 2014. Retrieved from [https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/hillary-clinton-failure-to-help-syrian-rebels-led-to-the-rise-of-isis/375832/?utm\\_source=twb](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/hillary-clinton-failure-to-help-syrian-rebels-led-to-the-rise-of-isis/375832/?utm_source=twb)

<sup>26</sup>Kissinger, *World Order*, 325

rubble emerged extremist groups like ISIS, and society sharply divided into sectarian groups; and US dream of pluralist democracy shattered to the ground. He advocated a military invasion of Syria, and like Hillary Clinton, opined that US must support opposition groups that were against Assad.<sup>27</sup> Kissinger went to the extreme, and he was not alone to think like that, by suggesting the division of Syria along sectarian lines; and this could only be done by supporting one sectarian group against another. For Kissinger when ISIS to be defeated then US must support Sunni sect against Shia. That kind of approach would further reinforce sectarian mentality. He wanted to support Sunni sect in order to counter the influence of Iran in Middle East; and he suggested the nature of containment policy for Iran that US adopted against Soviets during cold war. The fundamental flaw, let alone discussing others, with such policy are that the sectarian politics would produce cataclysm in Syrian and formation of normal state would be next to impossible, because society would get atomized into groups. The realism of Henry Kissinger demands the US should stand with Sunni sectarian group against Shia in Syria and in Middle East in general to counter hegemony of Iran.<sup>28</sup> Such kind of approach would never bring peace to people, and Shia community in Middle East would regard US as their enemy. Kissinger sought to exploit weaker point of Middle East people and that weaker point is to escalate sectarian crisis amongst them.

Obama foreign policy approach was pragmatic, internationalist and focused oriented to bring peace and stability; and wanted to secure US interest on new lines. Joseph Nye aptly wrote about Obama that his policy of restraint did not mean he was isolationist.<sup>29</sup> He set forth agenda for a new order in the Middle East and that was based on real assessment of the political and social condition of that region. He learnt from the past mistakes of those leaders who relied on military to pursue foreign policy objectives and they were imprisoned to fix ideological narratives and were ignorant of ground realities. His rapprochement policy was for the adjustment of geopolitical and strategic goals. He criticized Richard Nixon and his close foreign policy advisor Henry Kissinger for making blunders by relying on military strength to achieve objectives. He argued that their rash and aggressive decision haunted US interests even to his own times. He lambasted their theory of foreign policy by saying "So we dropped more ordnance on Cambodia and Laos than on Europe a in World War 2, and yet ultimately, Nixon withdrew, Kissinger went to Paris, and all we left behind was chaos, slaughter and authoritarian governments that finally, over time, have emerged from the hell."<sup>30</sup> He said people were still affecting in those countries from the unexploded bombs that became mines and on routine basis people suffered from that. He questioned how you could claim that such sort of strategy would promote US interest abroad. Obama doctrine was based on that US could secure her interest in a best way only if it would not interfere unnecessarily in other countries and respect their sovereignty, engage with them to secure mutual interests and dealt hard only with those who posed existentialist threat to US.

#### **4. NEW APPROACH FOR MIDDLE EAST: AIM AT BRINGING REAL PROGRESS AND STABILITY**

Obama did not want to repeat interventionist policy in Middle East. He set-out the agenda of mutual cooperation and mutual respect for bringing about balance of order in the Middle East. That policy would test diplomacy to the breaking point. He realized that it was beyond the kernel of his power to mend wrongs and impose Western value on a different civilization. He stressed US must realize its limitation that she could not solve all the problems of Middle East with a magic stick of military power. He was aware of the deep rooted cultural and social values of Arabs that have shaped their political landscape according to its civilizational ethos. The social structure of the Arabs has been tribal in nature, and Obama abhorred tribalism to the core. He said he could not solve the issue of shia-sunni split because it was centuries old. But he said it was indispensable for the peace and prosperity of the region if some sort reconciliation to be brought about between these two groups, otherwise proxy war between them would lead that region to a perilous future. He said "Competition

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<sup>27</sup> Jeffery Goldberg, "The Lessons of Henry Kissinger". *The Atlantic*, December, 2016 Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/12/the-lessons-of-henry-kissinger/505868/>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Nye "Obama the Pragmatist", *Project Syndicate*, June. 10, 2014 Retrieved from <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/joseph-s--nye-defends-obama-s-approach-to-foreign-policy-against-critics-calling-for-a-more-muscular-approach>

<sup>30</sup> Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine".

between the Saudis and Iranians- which has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria, and Iraq and Yemen- requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of peace.”<sup>31</sup> He said allies should not be dependent on the US in their proxy war and if sectarian crisis happens to be out of control and allies lacked a will to put down flames then even they should not drag the US to resolve them their crisis through our military might and “that would be in the interest neither of the United States nor of the Middle East.”<sup>32</sup> The same case was with growing extremism that caused the rise of ISIL in Middle East. For Obama, there were cultural, social and political, and economic reasons that played a part in the growth of such destructive organization. It shows the effectiveness of his foreign policy that he knew about the internal intricacies of the Arab nations.

For Obama, the grave danger the US allies in Middle East does not face from external force like Iran but from internally. The oppressive political environment, the unemployed youth, religious charged political ideology and no freedom of expression so that people could address their grievances and the dissatisfaction of people all combined was the real cause of growing extremism and that could prove great threat from within to states in Middle East.<sup>33</sup> US could ward off her ally from external threats like Saudi Arabia from Iran but to counter internal one the Arab states have to bring changes in their body politics. Obama said the growth of extremism was also due to economic reason besides social and political one. That argument was also shared by Thomas Picketty, an eminent French economist and the writer of famous book, *Capital In the Twentieth First Century*, wrote in one his article that the real cause of growing disaffection, extremism and the rise of ISIS in the Middle East was economic inequality, and unless that issue is addressed things would not change. “if we take the area extending from Egypt to Iran and running through Syria, Iraq and Arabian Peninsula, approximately 300 million people, we see that the GNP of the oil monarchies amounts to between 60% and 70% of the GNP for barely 10% of the population; this makes it the most unequal region of the world. Furthermore, we should point out a minority of the population in the oil monarchies appropriates a disproportionate share of this wealth, while large groups (women and immigrant workers) are maintained in a semi slavery.”<sup>34</sup>

The traditional allies were not happy with Obama's grand strategy for Middle East because he did not want to sacrifice US larger interest in the region for the sake of backing allies unconditionally and blindly. For him the real peace and stability in the Middle East would only come when its rulers would adopt enlightened approach and shun sectarianism and engage youth in political participation. Israel was also unhappy with the grand strategy of Obama. He was as much concerned about the plight of Palestinians as he was committed for the security of Israel. The problem of Palestine could be solved in the two-State solution of Israel. He linked that issue with the overall security and stability of the Middle East and US vital interest in the region as well. US could enhance its power and influence in the region if it successfully addresses the genuine problems of Palestinians. It could also give setback to extremists in the region who claimed America came to Middle East to only secure Jews interest against the Muslims and not for overall stability. Besides two-States solution, Obama administration took a firm stand against the illegal construction of Israel in the occupied territories. When United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334 was moved in 23 December 2016, then US did not veto it when other powers like United Kingdom, France, Russia and China endorsed it. The UN resolution called for the halting of all illegal settlement and human right abuses against Palestinian citizens.<sup>35</sup> His administration showed it clear to its closest ally that everything has its limits and US would have to champion human values and dignity above all, and that showed how Obama was internationalist. Israel showed its scathing reaction over the UN resolution and relations between

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, “Iran and The Obama Doctrine”. *The New York Times*, April. 5, 2015 Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/06/opinion/thomas-friedman-the-obama-doctrine-and-iran-interview.html?smid=tw-share&r=0>

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Picketty, “Clamping down with Law and Order will not enough”, *Le blog de* , 2015. Thomas Picketty Retrieved from [http://piketny.blog.lemonde.fr/2015/11/24/clamping-down-with-law-and-order-will-not-be-enough/?utm\\_source=dlvr.it&utm\\_medium=twitter#xtor=RSS-32280322](http://piketny.blog.lemonde.fr/2015/11/24/clamping-down-with-law-and-order-will-not-be-enough/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter#xtor=RSS-32280322)

<sup>35</sup> United Nations, “Israel Settlements Have no Validity, Constitute Flagrant Violation of International Laws, Security Council Reaffirms”, 2016 Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12657.doc.htm>



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Obama swung to low spirit. Israel rejected the resolution as shameful.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Barack Obama's foreign policy of Middle East was based on to secure US interest on new lines and to bring peace and stability in that region. He was as much concerned with bringing peace and harmony in Middle East as he was concerned with redefining US interest with the changing geopolitical realities. For him, US could not gain real objectives in that region unless it brought change in its hard-core attitude and come out of stereotypes. He did not succumb to the pressure of his traditional allies who tried to trick Obama to shape his policies that could best match with their interests. He knew that if United States would made policies according to the demands of allies then it could never gain lasting and fruitful objectives in Middle East. That's was the reason he struck Iran nuclear deal despite the protest and anger of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel. He made that deal in order to redefine US role in Middle East. He wanted to restore American image as a power to be worth trusting, as a power not hungry for resources and had no imperialist ambitions; but was committed for peace and order in the region. Obama policies if to be pursued by his successors then US would secure its interest on a broader term. He projected America as a benevolent power having liberal and internationalist approach.

Now the new President Donald Trump disregarded Obama doctrine so it has been no no more on the priority of US foreign policy agenda. President Trump has adopted stereotypical attitude against Muslims, and labeled them as terrorist. During his Presidential campaign he vowed he would not allow Muslims to US. He banned the entry to US the citizens of six Muslim majority countries that includes Iran, Sudan, Somalia, Syria, Yemen and Libya. That decision was a serious blow to the conciliatory policy based on humanism developed by Obama during his eight years in office. That kind of groundless and prejudiced based approach would give further impetus to extremism and the growth of ISIL and disillusionment of the Muslim youth in liberal and democratic values of the West. Obama said only a fraction of Muslims possessed extremist and nihilist tendency that led them to join ISIL and to counter that needed multipronged strategy. The rise of ISIL was happened due to many reasons. The more important reasons were political, ideological and economic. Further, they were supported by US allies themselves.

As a leader, Obama was aware of the socio-political realities of the region. He preferred engagement over confrontation. He leaned heavily on diplomacy to secure US interest on more pragmatic ways. The nuclear deal of Iran is best example of it. He wanted to win over Iran to US camp. If US would engage with Iran then there would be chance that it would not heavily rely on Russia for security concerns and would stop playing proxy wars in Middle East. Obama policy was meant to make all Middle East states to be dependent on US for their security and survival. He wanted US to be a champion of balance of order and peace in the region. This could only happen when US would lean more on soft power and engagement.

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#### **AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**



Muhammad Fayyaz is a Lecturer in History subject at Government College No.1 Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. He received M.Phil degree in the subject of History in 2015 from Quaid-e-Azam University Islamabad, Pakistan. He is interested academically in the history of South-Asian Studies, Middle East Affairs, Security Studies, International Relations, Human Rights, Rule of Law and Cultural Studies.

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