

FAILED STRATEGY? THE LEGACY OF BARACK OBAMA'S PRESIDENCY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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Introduction

The President of the United States of America is a politician whose actions are not only closely observed by decision-makers and the public around the world, but also provoke real consequences that often lead to the evolution of the global order. The actions taken by American presidents (and their failure to act) in relation to specific geopolitical regions are the subject of analyses whose accuracy depends on the current problems on the international stage, e.g. Bill Clinton's decision to initiate a NATO military operation in Yugoslavia, or the restoration of diplomatic relations with Cuba, achieved during Barack Obama's second term as the 44th U.S. President). Among all the geopolitical regions that can be distinguished, it is possible to indicate one region that has been playing a key role in the global security system for more than a century, and thus constitutes a major challenge for American foreign policy and those responsible for it. It is, beyond doubt, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Owing to the strategic location of the region at the intersection of transport routes and, consequently, the overlapping of interests of various actors on the global political stage, political and economic domination in the Middle East and North Africa is of crucial importance for American leadership and Washington's superpower status in the world arena (Zajac

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2005, 137–138). Although consecutive American administrations have adopted different (sometimes fundamentally different) strategies toward the MENA region, the awareness of the region's significance and the necessity to maintain U.S. influence in it are self-evident to American decision-makers. What is debatable is the form of this activity and its scope, closely linked to the possible involvement (political, economic, military, social or cultural) of other actors, both regional and those whose ambitions extend far beyond the region.

The above mechanisms can be clearly observed in the three most recent U.S. presidencies: of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and of Donald Trump which ended in 2020. Each of these politicians was forced to adjust the original framework of U.S. foreign policy toward the MENA region, which is best exemplified by George W. Bush's need to respond to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Pastusiak 2018, 361–374). Since Donald Trump had just finished his term in office, it is too early to evaluate his policy toward the Middle East and North Africa even though one can already attempt to draw some conclusions. In the case of Barack Obama, however, it is only right to evaluate his achievements. Even a superficial analysis of the Obama's legacy in the Middle East reveals the occurrence of descriptions such as “failed strategy” or “disappointment” (Sullivan 2016). It is a fact that the MENA region changed beyond recognition during his presidency. Given the complexity of the issues analyzed, formulating an unequivocal assessment of Obama's achievements requires taking several factors into account.

Objectives and area of research, methodology

This article attempts to answer the following research problems:

- Was the foreign policy of Obama's administration characterized by reduced involvement in relations with MENA countries in favor of intensified relations with other geopolitical regions?
- Did Obama's foreign policy toward the MENA region fail to bring the desired outcomes, and did it suffer a clear defeat?

Recognizing that the geopolitics of the MENA region and U.S. foreign policy are extremely complex and multi-faceted problems, the Authors' intention is not a detailed analysis and description of all aspects of Obama's strategy in relation to the region under study. They rather seek to list and

describe a few factors in order to answer the research problems formulated above.

In order to address the research problems as thoroughly as possible, the Authors divided the paper into three parts, devoted to the following: an analysis of the place of the MENA region in U.S. political manifestos; the significance of the region for U.S. diplomacy; initiatives undertaken in relation to President Obama's administration. The research presented in the first and second part is mostly of a quantitative character and seeks to answer the first research problem. The second research problem is addressed in the third part, based on qualitative research.

The spatial criteria established for the needs of the article encompass states forming the geopolitical region known as "the Middle East and North Africa." Given the difficulty in establishing the boundaries of the region, the Authors decided to apply the most frequently used geographical limits encompassing the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Libya. This spatial framework of the Middle East and North Africa take into account the unique characteristics of the region that is an arena of interactions of the states listed above as well as external players influencing the shape of the global order. Content analysis is the research method used in the study. It enables an accurate verification of the claims in the political manifestos outlining U.S. foreign policy as well as a precise analysis of acts of law and reports from press conferences of entities responsible for U.S. diplomacy. Content measurement and analysis of diplomatic documents and reports are techniques that supplement content analysis.

The MENA Region as the Subject of Political Manifestos

In the first part of this study, the Authors analyze the State of the Union addresses (SOTU) delivered by Barack Obama during his first term as U.S. President (2009–2012)³. The goal of the analysis is to calculate how much space in his annual addresses delivered to a Joint session of the U.S. Congress was devoted by the 44th President to international affairs, including relations with partners in the MENA region, and to indicate issues identified by Obama as key to U.S. policy toward the MENA region. In order to address the

³ Annual addresses delivered by U.S. Presidents are an opportunity to indicate the country's most important problems and present the administration's plan for the coming months. Given their official character, the State of the Union addresses can be regarded as manifestos of Washington's foreign policy (Dahl 2019, 99–100).

research problems, it needs to be determined whether the analyzed region was neglected by the Obama administration in favor of intensified relations with other geopolitical regions. The answers are provided in the table presenting percentage data for three geopolitical regions, i.e., Asia-Pacific, Europe as well as the Middle East and North Africa⁴ in State of the Union addresses in the years 2005–2012. A comparison of the corresponding indicators for the second term of George W. Bush as U.S. President (2005–2008) and the first term of his successor (2009–2012) will enable a fuller assessment of the first research problem.

In his first State of the Union Address, given on February 24, 2009, Barack Obama focused on the need to bring the American economy out of the then ongoing financial crisis, and devoted relatively little attention to issues associated with foreign policy (only 10.2 percent of the length of his speech, see Table 1). Alongside general remarks (that can be expected from every newly sworn in administration) concerning the vision of the role of the U.S. in the international arena, Obama referred to the financial aspects of the U.S. military operations conducted in Iraq and Afghanistan (El-Khawas 2012, 127–128). He also pointed out the need to intensify efforts aimed at reaching lasting peace in the relations between Israel and her neighbors (SOTU 2009), and the need to fight extremism and terrorism.

4 These regions were selected according to the following principle: the subject of research (Middle East and North Africa), the main focus of diplomatic involvement declared by the administration (Asia-Pacific) and the traditional ally (Europe).

Table 1. Selected geopolitical regions in State of the Union Addresses in the years 2005–2012

President, year	Length of the address (number of words)	Content related to foreign policy (%)				
		Percentage of the address devoted to foreign policy	Foreign policy toward three regions under study	including relations with Asia-Pacific countries	including relations with European countries	including relations with MENA region countries
Barack Obama, 2012	6979	15.6	11.2	37.2	2.8	60
Barack Obama, 2011	6789	18.9	10.2	59	7.2	33.8
Barack Obama, 2010	7303	14	7.2	25.7	12.7	61.6
Barack Obama, 2009	5914	10.2	3.5	21.3	–	78.7
George W. Bush, 2008	5708	48.3	39.4	17	6.9	76.1
George W. Bush, 2007	5550	45.8	27.3	8.5	6.3	85.2
George W. Bush, 2006	5299	44.8	20.2	11.2	9.3	79.5
George W. Bush, 2005	5031	35.6	28.3	5.8	6.3	87.9

Slightly more attention was devoted to international affairs in the State of the Union Address in 2010 (14 percent). Speaking to a joint session of the Congress, the President repeatedly stressed the need for the United States to adapt to the changing conditions on the world political and economic stage, citing the successes of China, Germany and India in this respect. He also emphasized the need to establish new partnerships while promoting values (“We’ve prohibited torture and strengthened partnerships from the Pacific to South Asia to the Arabian Peninsula”; SOTU 2010), speaking most extensively on the question of delivering on one of the key election promises, i.e., withdrawing American troops from Iraq:

As we take the fight to al Qaeda, we are responsibly leaving Iraq to its people. As a candidate, I promised that I would end this war, and that is what I am doing as President. We will have all of our combat troops out of Iraq by the end of this August. We will support the Iraqi government -- we will support the Iraqi government as they hold elections, and we will continue to partner with the Iraqi people to promote regional peace and prosperity. But make no mistake: This war is ending, and all of our troops are coming home (SOTU 2010).

More than 10 percent of the length of the 44th President's speech in 2011 concerned international affairs. Besides the references, also made in previous State of the Union addresses, to the necessity of continuing the fight against extremism and al Qaeda that was planning further terrorist attacks, two issues were of crucial importance for the analysis of the foreign policy of Obama's administration toward the MENA region, namely the announcement of U.S. troops leaving Iraq as victors and handing over power to the Iraqi government ("America's commitment has been kept; the Iraq War is coming to an end"; SOTU 2011) as well as the unequivocal support of the movement for social and political change that was developing at the time of the speech and came to be known as the Arab Spring ("the United States of America stands with the people of Tunisia, and supports the democratic aspirations of all people"; SOTU 2011).

The U.S. President also spoke, though very briefly, about the role of diplomacy in putting pressure on Iran ("Because of a diplomatic effort to insist that Iran meet its obligations, the Iranian government now faces tougher and tighter sanctions than ever before"; SOTU 2011), and Washington's involvement in carrying out the independence referendum in South Sudan, presenting it as a confirmation of the existence of a purpose in U.S. actions, which stands in opposition to the concept of using force as an end unto itself ("Recent events have shown us that what sets us apart must not just be our power – it must be the purpose behind it. In South Sudan – with our assistance – the people were finally able to vote for independence after years of war"; SOTU 2011). On the other hand, it must be noted that the bulk of Obama's speech on foreign affairs concerned political and economic relations with countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The U.S. President emphasized the role of China and India as increasingly important partners for the U.S., and contrasted the ability of these economies to adapt with the American economy that required further reform ("Meanwhile, nations like China and India realized that with some changes of their own, they could compete in this new world"; SOTU 2011). He also spoke proudly of the successes of his administration in trade relations with the Asian countries ("Recently,

we signed agreements with India and China that will support more than 250,000 jobs in the United States” (SOTU 2011), which is a clear reflection of the priorities of Washington's foreign policy in that period (Cohen 2013, 339).

The State of the Union Address in 2012 was the most “international” speech of this kind given by Barack Obama during his first term as U.S. President (index of 11.2 percent). Among the three geopolitical regions analyzed, the most attention was devoted to the Middle East and North Africa region. Describing the transformations in this region, Obama stressed the role that, in his opinion, U.S. diplomacy should continue to play and the values that it should uphold:

As the tide of war recedes, a wave of change has washed across the Middle East and North Africa, from Tunis to Cairo; from Sana'a to Tripoli. A year ago, Gaddafi was one of the world's longest-serving dictators, a murderer with American blood on his hands. Today, he is gone. And in Syria, I have no doubt that the Assad regime will soon discover that the forces of change can't be reversed, and that human dignity can't be denied. How this incredible transformation will end remains uncertain. But we have a huge stake in the outcome. And while it is ultimately up to the people of the region to decide their fate, we will advocate for those values that have served our own country so well. We will stand against violence and intimidation. We will stand for the rights and dignity of all human beings; men and women; Christians, Muslims, and Jews. We will support policies that lead to strong and stable democracies and open markets, because tyranny is no match for liberty (SOTU 2012).

Summing up his first term that was drawing to an end, Obama expressly responded to the re-evaluation of the priorities of U.S. foreign policy that he was often accused of (and still is), that is, giving priority to relations with countries of the Asia and Pacific region at the expense of U.S. involvement in the Middle East and Europe, among others (“Pivot to Asia”; Grabowski 2012, 107–111). Obama rejected those accusations unequivocally: “The renewal of American leadership can be felt across the globe. Our oldest alliances in Europe and Asia are stronger than ever. [...] America is back” (SOTU 2012).

While it is difficult to judge Obama's assertion about the United States return to the “global game” (for the very reason that it would require proving that the U.S. had been excluded from that “game” at a certain point), it is possible to analyze the data collected in Table 2 in order to verify the first research problem (“Was the foreign policy of Obama's administration characterized by reduced involvement in relations with MENA countries in

favor of intensified relations with other geopolitical regions?”).

The first dimension of analysis is a comparison of the percentage distribution of content in the consecutive addresses with regard to U.S. foreign policy toward countries of the Asia-Pacific region, Europe and the MENA region. In three State of the Union addresses given by Barack Obama (2009, 2010 and 2012), the most attention was devoted to relations with countries in the MENA region (78.7, 61.6 and 50 percent respectively), except for the year 2011 when the President focused more on relations with APAC countries (59 percent) at the expense of the MENA region, which took up 33.8 percent of the part of Obama's address devoted to the regions analyzed. Although the Asia-Pacific region was not a priority region to Obama (at least at the level of declarations), its growing importance should be noted (21.3, 25.7, 59 and 37.2 percent in the consecutive years under study). The growing significance of relations with APAC countries was accompanied by the declining intensity of contacts with European partners (starting with the lack of any mention about the character of mutual relations in 2009, to 12.7 percent in 2010, 7.2 percent in 2011 and as little as 2.8 in 2012).

Another dimension of analysis is a comparison of the above data with analogous indicators for the second term of George W. Bush (2005–2008). As data in Table 1 indicate, in all State of the Union addresses delivered by George W. Bush in the years 2005–2008, the most attention was devoted to relations with the MENA countries (from 76.1 percent in 2008 to 87.9 percent in 2005). This was largely connected with the American military presence in Iraq, thus described by President Bush:

Our generational commitment to the advance of freedom, especially in the Middle East, is now being tested and honored in Iraq. [...] And the victory of freedom in Iraq will strengthen a new ally in the war on terror, inspire democratic reformers from Damascus to Tehran [...] (SOTU 2005).

During the first address in the period analyzed, George W. Bush devoted more attention to relations with European countries than Asian countries (6.3 and 5.8 percent respectively), but this proportion changed in the following years, the biggest difference occurring in the last year of presidency (6.9 versus 17 percent respectively). It is also worth noting that, despite the considerably shorter addresses of the 43rd President of the United States (his longest speech was shorter from the shortest speech given by Obama in the period under study: 5708 versus 5914 words, respectively), he devoted much more time to foreign policy issues than his successor (Frankowski 2006, 126–136).

Leaving aside the 2008 State of the Union Address, which had to have “international” overtones as it was the last SOTU of his presidency, it can be observed that Bush discussed international affairs on average three times as often as his successor. The fact that his addresses were, on average, by about 15 percent shorter than those given by Obama seems to enhance the differences between the priorities set by the two consecutive administrations. On the other hand, it is worth noting that, despite Obama's initial attempts to distance himself from active foreign policy (as reflected in the small, just above 10 percent, proportion of the 2009 State of the Union Address devoted to foreign policy), the fast-changing international situation forced the 44th President of the United States to be more active than he had planned (18.9 percent in 2011 and 15.6 percent in 2012).

United States Diplomacy Toward the Middle East and North Africa

The President of the United States of America is most often regarded as the entity responsible for conducting U.S. foreign policy (Dahl 2019). Although both the American constitution and the practice of the political system in the United States provide for a whole range of bodies having powers to influence U.S. foreign policy⁵, the character of this study does not allow the Authors to describe them all. Owing to the spatial limitations in this part of the study, only one indicator of Washington's diplomatic involvement in relations with international partners could be presented, namely an analysis of the destinations of the trips made by U.S. presidents. Similarly, to the first part of the study, it aimed to compare data concerning the indicators relevant to the second term of George W. Bush (2005–2008) and the first term of Barack Obama (2009–2012). The analysis addressed the research problems, the first problem in particular.

⁵ In the case of certain bodies, e.g., the Congress, Department of State or Supreme Court, these powers are quite significant (Duncan and Goddard 2003; Grant 2004; Wordliczek 2005).

Table 2: Trips of U.S. Presidents to the selected geopolitical regions in the years 2005–2012

President, year	Number of trips	Trips to Asia-Pacific countries (% of all trips)	Trips to European countries (% of all trips)	Trips to MENA countries (% of all trips)
Barack Obama, 2012	7	5 (71.4%)	–	–
Barack Obama, 2011	10	2 (20%)	5 (50%)	–
Barack Obama, 2010	9	6 (66.7%)	2 (22.2%)	–
Barack Obama, 2009	25	4 (16%)	11 (44%)	4 (16%)
Obama total for 2009–2012	51	17 (33.3%)	18 (35.3%)	4 (7.8%)
George W. Bush, 2008	32	5 (15.6%)	9 (28.1%)	11 (34.4%)
George W. Bush, 2007	15	1 (6.7%)	7 (46.7%)	1 (6.7%)
George W. Bush, 2006	17	6 (35.3%)	6 (35.3%)	2 (11.8%)
George W. Bush, 2005	18	4 (22.2%)	9 (50%)	–
Bush total for 2005–2008	82	16 (19.5%)	31 (37.8%)	14 (17.1%)

Source: own work based on data published on the official website of the U.S. State Department

The data in Table 2 clearly show that the Middle East was not the most important destination in the diplomacy of Obama's administration. In the years 2009–2012, the 44th President of the United States visited only Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt (all these trips took place in 2009, shortly after he took office), which constitutes only a small portion of his diplomatic activity (four out of 51 foreign visits, i.e., 7.8 percent). During most of his trips (18), Obama visited the European partners; these destinations accounted for, respectively, 44, 22.2 and 55 percent of all trips in the years 2009–2011. It is worth stressing the considerable number of trips to APAC countries (17 visits, 33.3 percent) that Obama visited in each of the four years of his first term, i.e., 4, 6, 2 and 5 times in each consecutive year (16, 66.7, 20 and 71.4 percent of all international trips respectively) from 2009 to 2012.

Different proportions can be observed in the diplomatic activity of George W. Bush in the years 2005–2008. The total number of international

trips of the 43rd U.S. President was much higher in the period analyzed (82 versus 51 trips of his successor). While the importance of European partners in Bush's international agenda was similar (31 trips, 37.8 percent), it is worth noting Washington's distinctly greater diplomatic involvement in the relations with the MENA countries (14 trips, 17.1 percent). Although this involvement was considerable, it was not at the same level throughout his presidency: in 2006, Bush visited Jordan and Iraq, and a year later, he went to Iraq again. In 2008, his last year in office, Bush went on 32 international trips, most of which (11) were to the Middle East and North Africa. During that year the U.S. President visited Israel (twice), the Palestinian Autonomy, Kuwait, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt (twice to both countries), and Iraq. The Asia-Pacific region was an important destination in the diplomacy of the George W. Bush administration (although not as important as for his successor): Bush went on 16 trips there (19.5 percent) in the years 2005–2008.

The analysis of data collected in Table 2 seems to confirm the thesis about the considerably reduced diplomatic involvement in relations with the MENA countries during the first term of Barack Obama (decline from 17.1 to 7.8 percent), accompanied by the prioritization of Asian destinations (increase from 19.5 to 33.3 percent). The fact the intensity of relations with European partners was maintained by the Obama administration (35.3 versus 37.8 percent) only seems to confirm the thesis about the marginalization of the Middle East in foreign policy during Obama's first term (although Europe was not officially declared as a priority, the level of diplomatic activity was maintained).

Initiatives of the First Obama Administration Toward the MENA Region

Barack Obama's Middle East and North Africa strategy was clearly different from George W. Bush's strategy toward the region. Already during the presidential campaign in 2007–2008, Obama stressed the need to return to a "realistic" policy toward the region, citing the examples of a few of his predecessors, e.g., George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. A detailed strategy toward the MENA region can be found in the speech given by Obama at Cairo University on June 4, 2009. The address, entitled "A New Beginning" and lasting nearly one hour, is still regarded as Obama's manifesto concerning the region and, more broadly, the entire Arab-Muslim world (Dahl 2019, 80).

Barack Obama began his speech by honoring the civilization of Islam

and went on to review the relations of the United States with the countries in the region so far, indicating the visible difficulties and challenges. He made it clear that his administration's intention was not to interfere with the internal affairs of the individual states, but rather to build cooperation based on partnership, which was in accordance with his concept of "rationalizing American involvement in the region." As he assured:

I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles – principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings (Obama 2019).

Barack Obama mentioned the following issues among the most important challenges to foreign policy toward the MENA region in the years to come:

- combating all forms of extremism, i.e., continuing the fight against al Qaeda, continuing U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan, providing development aid to Afghanistan and Pakistan, withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq;
- working for the resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: using diplomatic tools to enforce the implementation of the already negotiated agreements, making Arab countries aware of the necessity to actively participate in the resolution of the conflict, which was, in fact, the only issue with regard to which the President announced a definite intensification of diplomatic efforts (Jervis 2017, 32),
- international control over the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction: actions aimed at preventing the nuclear arms race in the Middle East, introducing control over Iran's access to nuclear technologies;
- promoting democracy (but not imposing it by force);
- guaranteeing religious freedom;
- striving for the equality of women and men;
- working for economic development and ensuring equal opportunities (President Obama's Speech...).

Although the above speech is viewed as an example of Obama's oratory skills (Brookings Institute Experts 2009), it did not quite translate to subsequent American initiatives in the region, as evidenced, for example, by the absence of the President's trips to the MENA region in the years 2010–2012. Initially, the Washington administration focused on two key priorities, in accordance with previous announcements, i.e., Iraq and Israel, hailing the withdrawal of troops from Iraq as the first success. The question of working toward an Israeli–Palestinian deal was a different matter. Despite the efforts of the new administration, including President Obama himself, the actions undertaken resulted in the deterioration of U.S. relations with the parties concerned and did not bring any new arrangements. David Jervis rightly observed that

the U.S. had trouble getting the parties to talk with each other, much less engage in the serious discussions that might lead to peace. In both of the sustained efforts, the U.S. pressed Israel to make concessions, specifically halting construction of settlements on the West Bank, actions the U.S. had long viewed as impediments to peace, and in both, the American effort failed. As a result, U.S.-Israeli relations deteriorated (Jervis 2017, 36).

The dynamically changing international situation, including the transformations occurring in the Middle East and North Africa, forced Barack Obama to adjust his foreign policy priorities. A turning point occurred in 2011 when Washington's diplomatic involvement in the region increased⁶ with the intensification of actions linked with the Arab Spring, including the overthrowing of dictators in Egypt and Libya (Górak-Sosnowska 2016). In many cases, however, the more careful observation of the situation in the region by American decision-makers did not translate into effective action. At the end of Obama's presidency, the region was an arena of conflicts, including proxy wars (Syria, Yemen), the so-called Islamic State carried out successive executions and expanded its scope of impact, repeated acts of violence occurred in Afghanistan, the situation in Iraq was becoming less and less stable, while fundamentalist groups were taking power in Libya and Egypt (Crandall 2014, 442–456).

Despite the well-received speech from the beginning of his presidency, Obama did not manage to fulfill one of his most important promises: to

⁶ This is reflected in the data presented in Table 1, concerning the percentage distribution of the content of State of the Union addresses devoted to international affairs, where initially, the MENA region was losing its significance (60 percent in 2009 and 33.8 in 2010), but then started to regain it (61.6 in 2011 and 78.7 in 2012).

improve America's image in the Middle East. It is estimated that in the years 2014–2015, only 14 percent of Egyptians and Jordanians as well as 39 percent of Libyans expressed a favorable view of the United States, compared with 27, 25 and 55 percent respectively in 2009 (Jervis 2017, 46).

What should also be mentioned, however, is the agreement on the Iranian nuclear program, known as the Iran deal and regarded as one of two major successes of the Obama administration in the Middle East (alongside the withdrawal of troops from Iraq). The agreement, officially called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, was signed in Vienna on July 14, 2015 by representatives of Iran, United States, Russia, United Kingdom, France, China, Germany, and the European Union. This agreement granted UN inspectors access to Iranian military installations (each time with Tehran's consent), and contributed to the immediate fall of oil prices. When signing the deal (from which the United States has withdrawn pursuant to Donald Trump's decision), Barack Obama expressed his hope that Iran, bound by this international agreement, would cease to pose a threat to the American vision of regional order. As indicated above, these threats were quite numerous at the end of Obama's presidency, for which the 44th President has been criticized until today.

Final Remarks

Donald Trump's style of running foreign policy is considerably different from his predecessor. Since the day he took office, on January 20, 2017, the actions of the 45th U.S. President have led to the undoing of Barack Obama's legacy in the policy toward the MENA region, as demonstrated by the withdrawal of the United States from the nuclear deal with Iran (Friedman 2017). The evaluation of President Obama's achievements in the Middle East policy is open to debate, and the Authors of this paper have attempted such an evaluation based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The thesis, formulated based on the first research problem ("the foreign policy of Obama's administration is characterized by reduced involvement in relations with MENA countries in favor of intensified relations with other geopolitical regions"), has been corroborated by the research. Based on the selected political manifestos and actions in the sphere of diplomacy, it has been proven that the Middle East and North Africa was not a priority to the decision-makers in Washington in the years 2009–2012, unlike in the years 2005–2008. The smaller importance attached to the MENA region was accompanied by the increased diplomatic activity of the United States

toward the Asia-Pacific region, which should not come as a surprise in the context of the declared "pivot to Asia policy" (Grabowski 2012). At the level of declarations, the above trend was impeded by the need for Barack Obama to respond to the Arab Spring events even though it did not translate into greater diplomatic involvement in the region. The comparison of data illustrating the first term of President Obama with the second term of his predecessor George W. Bush seems to highlight the conclusions presented above.

The thesis formulated based on the second research problem ("Obama's foreign policy toward the MENA region failed to bring the desired outcomes, and thus suffered an unequivocal defeat") has not been upheld by the research. Although President Obama did not manage to implement most of his original plans (e.g., making considerable progress toward the resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, or improving the image of the United States in the region), he achieved a few significant successes, the most notable of which is the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and the conclusion of the nuclear deal with Iran. Similarly, to many previous politicians holding the office of U.S. President, e.g., Bill Clinton, Barack Obama was forced to confront his plans (rationalizing American involvement in the region) with reality as a result of the events of the Arab Spring.

Summing up, is "a failed strategy", a phrase commonly used in the literature, an adequate description of Obama's legacy in the MENA region? It is not, in the opinion of the authors of this paper, because it does not reflect the complexity of the problems analyzed. This complex subject matter requires taking account of a whole range of factors. One should go beyond the declarations (e.g., data published in Table 1) and, most importantly, examine the facts, i.e., the diplomatic involvement and the actions undertaken in various dimensions. Taking into consideration the above elements, supplemented with a comparison of Obama's actions with the initiatives of his predecessors, enables to view Barack Obama as a leader who committed mistakes, like his predecessors, but also achieved significant success; he did not manage to implement his entire agenda adopted at the outset of his presidency, but he did not avoid responding to the current crises.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to verify whether “a failed strategy”, a phrase commonly used in the literature, is an adequate description of Barack Obama’s legacy in the Middle East and North Africa. Based on the selected political manifestos and actions in the sphere of diplomacy, it has been proven that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region was not a priority to the decision-makers in Washington in the years 2009–2012, as opposite to 2005–2008 years. Although President Obama did not manage to implement most of his original plans, he achieved a few significant successes, the most notable of which is the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and the conclusion of the nuclear deal with Iran. Authors seek to contextualize and explain Obama’s failures and successes, arguing that the usage of the phrase “a failed strategy” does not reflect the complexity of the problems analyzed..

KEYWORDS

U.S. Foreign Policy; MENA; Barack Obama; George W. Bush.

Received on November 04, 2020

Approved on September 09, 2021