



## **Obama, Romney, and the Foreign Policy Debate**

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the third and final presidential debate of the 2012 campaign was the similarity between the two candidates on many basic foreign policy issues. Part of the reason is that, as he did in the first two debates, GOP candidate Mitt Romney reversed himself on a number of extreme right-wing positions he had taken earlier in a desperate effort to depict himself as a moderate. At the same time, Obama's hawkish stances served as yet another reminder of just how far to the right Obama has evolved since running as an anti-war candidate just four years ago.

Indeed, Romney's perceived need to lie about Obama's record and his reluctance to provide much in the way of specific policy alternatives is indicative of how little difference there actually is between the two when it comes to the U.S. role in the world.

Both candidates agree on American exceptionalism, as exemplified by Obama's insistence that "America remains the one indispensable nation." And both agreed that this hegemonic role in international affairs would be enforced militarily. For example, Obama bragged that, despite record deficits and painful cutbacks in important domestic programs, "our military spending has gone up every single year that I've been in office." Furthermore, he pointed out his policy "is not reducing our military spending. It's maintaining it." U.S. military spending is now higher than it was during the height of the Cold War and comes close to equaling the military budgets of every other country in the world combined. Despite this—and his supposed concerns about the federal debt—Romney has called for dramatic increases in military spending.

### **The Red (and Blue) Line on Iran**

Both candidates insisted that not only was the prospect of Iran developing nuclear weapons unacceptable, but even suggested they would forbid Iran from having a nuclear program of any kind—despite provisions in the Nonproliferation Treaty guaranteeing the right to develop nuclear energy. For example, Romney declared that "an Iranian nuclear program is not acceptable to us," and Obama concurred that the only deal the United States would accept with Iran was one in which "they end their nuclear program." Neither candidate mentioned the shared assessment of U.S. and Israeli intelligence that the Iranians have not actually begun building a nuclear weapon, or even decided to build one.

Neither candidate hinted at sanctions against Israel, India, or Pakistan for their nuclear programs, despite their having developed actual nuclear weapons and despite their ongoing violations of UN Security Council resolutions targeting their nuclear programs. However, Obama touted the way he had helped lead an international effort to impose "the strongest sanctions against Iran in history," which he noted are "crippling their economy." This comes despite appeals by that country's pro-democracy movement that these increased sanctions have actually resulted in enormous human suffering and ultimately hurt their cause. Romney, meanwhile, complained that Obama's sanctions were not strict enough.

Once again, Obama repeated the false claim—which Romney has also asserted previously—that Iranian president Ahmadinejad has threatened to "wipe Israel off the map." This statement was long ago demonstrated to have been a [mistranslation](#). Romney twice insisted that, as result of this alleged threat, he would have Ahmadinejad "indicted under the Genocide Convention," despite the inability of a U.S. president to do so—particularly on the grounds of saying something he never actually said.

Such lies are being used to distract Americans from the failure of the bipartisan U.S. policy of unfairly singling out Iran for its nuclear program while failing to support a nuclear weapons-free zone for the entire region, which would lead to eliminating the nuclear arsenals of U.S. allies and would forbid the United States from bringing tactical nuclear weapons into the region.

## **Human Rights Slighted**

Obama and Romney's double standards also pertain to human rights issues. For example, Obama talked about going to the Israeli border town of Sderot, which had suffered rocket attacks from Hamas forces in the Gaza Strip. He described how he "saw families there who showed me where missiles had come down near their children's bedrooms, and I was reminded of what that would mean if those were my kids, which is why, as president, we funded an Iron Dome program to stop those missiles."

A total of four Israeli children have been killed by Hamas rockets. Fortunately, none have been killed in Sderot or other parts of Israel by Hamas rockets since 2004, well before the U.S.-funded Iron Dome program was instigated. By contrast, the Israeli human rights groups [B'Tselem](#) estimated that 252 Palestinian children aged 15 and younger were killed by Israeli forces in the nearby Gaza Strip in a three-week period alone not long after Obama's 2008 visit—which Obama has failed to condemn. Indeed, despite [Amnesty International's call](#) for foreign countries to cease military aid to both Israel and Hamas because of their attacks against civilian areas, Obama has actually increased military aid to Israel. Indeed, neither Obama nor Romney has any problems providing weapons to allied governments that use them against civilian targets, even children.

Despite Israel's violation of scores of UN Security Council resolutions, ongoing gross and systematic human rights violations, and unprecedented intransigence in the peace process, Obama bragged during the debate that "we have created the strongest military and intelligence cooperation between our two countries in history." Incredibly, Romney criticized him for not supporting the right-wing Israeli government enough!

Indeed, unable to place himself much further to the right when it comes to supporting Netanyahu's government, Romney has repeatedly insisted that Obama had explicitly called on creating "daylight" between the United States and Israel, despite repeated analyses from [fact-checkers](#) that Obama actually never said that. Israeli Deputy Prime Minister and [Defense Minister Ehud Barak](#) has praised U.S. support for Israel's security needs under the Obama administration as unparalleled.

Obama stressed that now that Egypt has a democratically elected government, "they have to make sure that they take responsibility for protecting religious minorities — and we have put significant pressure on them to make sure they're doing that — to recognize the rights of women, which is critical throughout the region." Unfortunately, the administration has shown little inclination to push for the rights of women and religious minorities under non-elected allied governments like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

Despite his poor human rights record in the Middle East—which has included supporting the Mubarak dictatorship prior to the uprising which ousted him and providing his repressive military and internal security forces with over \$4 billion in security assistance between 2009 and 2011—Obama chose to rewrite history by claiming that he "stood on the side of democracy" in Egypt and elsewhere. Romney, meanwhile, has promised to "[deepen](#)" what he refers to as "critical cooperation" with allied dictatorships.

The rise of al-Qaeda-allied extremists in northern Mali was mentioned twice in the debate, but not how the U.S.-backed war in Libya—which was supported by both candidates—directly contributed to this troubling development. Nor did either candidate mention how the U.S.-backed war resulted in the proliferation of militias—now totaling over 200,000 fighters in a country of less than 6 million people—including the radical Islamist group that attacked the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, which killed the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans

and has become a strange obsession of Romney and the Republican Party in the waning days of the campaign. Despite all this, Obama claimed during the debate that the U.S. intervention in Libya was done “in a careful, thoughtful way, making certain that we knew who we were dealing with, that those forces of moderation on the ground were ones that we could work with.”

Over the objections of American labor unions and human rights groups, both candidates have supported expanding free-trade agreements to additional countries—including Colombia, a country in which trade unionists have been brutally suppressed. Obama has also pushed through free-trade deals with South Korea and Panama. Despite this, Romney has claimed that Obama “has not signed one new free trade agreement.”

### **Romney’s Bizarre Statements**

On several occasions, despite the disappointing similarities between the two candidates, Romney was nevertheless able to prove himself far less adept at addressing foreign policy issues—and often showed his willingness to make demonstrably false claims about Obama’s record.

Romney twice criticized President Obama for supposedly being “silent” during the 2009 pro-democracy uprising. In reality, while recognizing that being too outspoken in his support for the revolution would backfire, Obama did call on the Iranian government to “stop all violent and unjust actions against its own people. The universal rights to assembly and free speech must be respected, and the United States stands with all who seek to exercise those rights.” Obama further demanded that the Iranian regime “respect the dignity of its own people and govern through consent, not coercion.”

Romney also seemed rather ignorant regarding basic geography, such as his claim that Syria was important to Iran because it is “their route to the sea.” Iran doesn’t border Syria, and Iran has over 1,500 miles of coastline.

Romney even raised the long-disproved Republican canard that Obama went on an “apology tour” to the Middle East in 2009 “criticizing America.” As [fact-checkers have documented](#) repeatedly, President Obama has not once ever apologized for the United States. Both Democratic and Republican administrations have made distinctions between their own foreign policies and those of their predecessors. Yet Romney even tried to rebuke Obama’s acknowledgement of the well-documented fact that the United States had previously dictated to other nations by saying, “America has not dictated to other nations. We have freed other nations from dictators.”

One particularly bizarre claim by Romney was that he believed Iranian diplomats should be treated as “pariahs” like the United States “treated the apartheid diplomats of South Africa.” In reality, the United States had full diplomatic relations with South Africa throughout the apartheid era, and the regime had a full complement of diplomats in Washington. By contrast, the United States hasn’t had diplomatic relations with Iran for 33 years.

Romney’s understanding of Latin America didn’t seem much stronger, such as his statement that economic opportunities presented by Latin America “have just not been taken advantage of fully.” Indeed, the U.S. history of “taking advantage” of Latin America economically is a major reason why many countries in that region are electing leftist governments, which have in large part rejected U.S. efforts to strengthen such ties.

Throughout the debate, Romney repeatedly insisted that the vaguely defined “strong leadership” he would provide—essentially a promise to be even more militaristic and confrontational than President Obama—would somehow make the United States more influential and the world more secure. In reality, history has shown just the opposite.

Perhaps the most disturbing prospect of a Romney presidency in regard to foreign policy is that his team [of foreign policy advisers](#) is made up overwhelmingly of neoconservative veterans of the Bush administration.

So while there may indeed be relatively few substantive disagreements between Romney and Obama on many foreign policy issues, given the power wielded by the president of the United States, even small distinctions can mean huge differences in the lives of many millions of people around the world. This is something to keep in mind, despite understandable cynicism about Obama, in deciding how to vote in the upcoming election.