In the Arena

Joe Klein

Old Borders, New Realities
The next President will confront a Middle East that looks nothing like the past

This is going to be a rocky path," Barack Obama told 60 Minutes, referring to the turmoil in the Middle East. "There are going to be bumps in the road." The President was talking about the long-term struggle to move a region of historically repressed and undereducated people toward freedom, but long-term thinking is impermissible in presidential campaigns, and Mitt Romney called him on his bumps: "We had an ambassador assassinated. We had a Muslim Brotherhood member elected to the presidency of Egypt. Iran is that much closer to having the capacity to build a nuclear weapon." For good measure, the Romney campaign chided the President for appearing on The View but not meeting with foreign leaders during U.N. General Assembly week. These pokes, along with a smooth appearance on 60 Minutes, were part of a micro-renaissance Romney was experiencing as a candidate—several days without a goof—that perhaps only the press noticed as the Republican's poll numbers plummeted in crucial states.

Obama's response to the Romney jabs came in an address to the General Assembly, one of the better speeches of his presidency. He celebrated the life of Ambassador Chris Stevens, by all accounts an exemplary man whose relentless humanity, as the President said, represented the exact opposite of the values embraced by his murderers. This was a "teachable moment," and Obama used it to explain what free speech—an absolute necessity for democracy—is all about. "As President of our country and Commander in Chief of our military, I accept that people are going to call me awful things every day," he said, to laughter, "and I will always defend their right to do so." He also condemned Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's annual Holocaust-denying clown show and warned the Iranians about their nuclear program in a way that even neo-conservatives might consider acceptable.

Obama’s path through the Arab Spring has indeed been bumpy; any President’s would have been. The days when the U.S. could manage events in the region through a network of local autocrats are over. But I found myself thinking that while Romney’s nostalgia for a hegemonic past was clearly implausible, the President’s patient hope for democracy might be overly optimistic as well. There is another possibility: regional chaos and, ultimately, a redrawing of the national borders that were imagined by Europeans at the end of World War I.

"There is still no solution to how to divide the former Ottoman Empire," says Robert Kaplan, whose compelling new book, The Revenge of Geography, raises the possibility that those neat, straight-line borders you see on maps of the region may not be permanent. "We’re not sure who will have the power to control which territories, whether you’ll have new tribal and sectarian lines. Today’s Syria and Iraq, for example, represent separate, age-old agricultural zones, but those borders were never clearly drawn." Indeed, Iraq was a Churchillian fantasy cobbled together from three satchelries of the Ottoman Empire. On the day before the President’s U.N. speech, the New York Times reported that Iraq’s Sunni minority was finding common cause with Syria’s Sunni-majority rebels. Six years ago, long before the carnage, Syria’s Bashar Assad told me he was extremely worried that “his” Kurds would break off and join Iraq’s semi-liberated northern province to form a greater Kurdistan. Who knows how the Kurds in Turkey and Iran would react to such an entity? This is the real challenge the U.S. faces in the region that stretches from the Mediterranean Sea to the Hindu Kush.

The problems in Afghanistan have their roots in a line drawn by the British in 1893 that amputates Pashtunistan—like Kurdistan, a coherent region—into Afghan and Pakistani pieces. The patch of sand called Jordan was a gift to Britain’s Hashemite allies in World War I. Israel, too, is a figment of the Western imagination, although—contra Ahmadinejad—it does have ancient roots in the region and has transformed itself into one of the world’s strongest democracies, a real place, a true nation (as is Iran, by the way).

It would be nice to have a real discussion about these issues, which may define the next era of U.S. foreign policy. Obviously, the presidential campaign is no place to have it. But I thought Romney announced a very promising idea on the morning of Obama’s U.N. speech. He proposed “prosperity pacts” that would reach past local governments to assist small-business people and nonprofits working to improve schools and justice systems in these fragile states. For once, Romney’s remarks were untainted by the anger and ignorance demanded by his party’s base. He spoke knowledgeably about the world while adhering to his conservative principles. He seemed, for a moment, a plausible candidate for President.