

## Talking tough — without specifics — on the Middle East

**By Editorial Board**

AFTER REPEATEDLY FUMBLING on foreign policy during his campaign, Mitt Romney delivered Monday a coherent and forceful critique of President Obama's handling of the upheavals in the Middle East. Arguing that a fateful struggle is playing out across the region, he said the United States is "missing an historic opportunity" because of Mr. Obama's failure to more aggressively support liberal forces against dictators and Islamic extremists. "It is the responsibility of our president to use America's great power to shape history — not to lead from behind, leaving our destiny at the mercy of events," Mr. Romney said.

That analysis of Mr. Obama's policies is one we largely agree with. As we have argued frequently, the president has been too cautious and slow in supporting secular liberals in Egypt against Islamists and the military. He left Iraq open to destabilization by failing to agree with its government on a continued U.S. military presence. He led the Middle East peace process into a blind alley through his wrongheaded quarreling with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu — a point Mr. Romney harped on.

Worst, Mr. Obama has stood by — or pursued feckless diplomatic initiatives — while Syria has descended into a maelstrom of massacres, opening the way to a sectarian civil war that could spread across the region. "The president is fond of saying that 'the tide of war is receding,'" Mr. Romney noted. "But when we look at the Middle East today — with Iran closer than ever to nuclear weapons capability, with the conflict in Syria threatening to destabilize the region, with violent extremists on the march, and with an American ambassador and three others dead, likely at the hands of al-Qaeda affiliates — it is clear that the risk of conflict in the region is higher now than when the president took office."

So how would Mr. Romney remedy these errors? That's where the weakness of his speech lay: It was hard to detect what tangible new steps the challenger would take. On Syria, Mr. Romney said he would "ensure" that "those members of the opposition who share our values . . . obtain the arms they need." The Obama administration is coordinating some materiel help to the rebels; Mr. Romney hinted that, unlike Mr. Obama, he would support supplying the rebels with anti-aircraft weapons. But he did not mention Turkey's call for the creation of protected zones on Syria's territory — a measure that would be more likely to end the war on terms favorable to the West.

Mr. Romney said he would prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapons "capability," in theory a more stringent red line than Mr. Obama's vow to prevent the actual construction of a bomb. But his means to that end sounded identical to those of the current administration. Having

criticized Mr. Obama for failing to support Iran's "green movement," Mr. Romney said nothing about encouraging popular resistance to the regime.

In all, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Mr. Romney, like Mr. Obama, is avoiding the embrace of a more robust Mideast policy out of fear of offending voters weary of international conflict or of dividing his own advisers. Mr. Obama's campaign released a new ad calling Mr. Romney's foreign policy "reckless." In fact, this was a too-cautious response to a too-cautious policy.

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