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The Real "Non-starter": Obama and the Imposed Solution

- Archives - 2010 - N° 21 Juillet 2010 - English -

Publication date: Thursday 15 July 2010

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At a private meeting with Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu on March 25, US President Barack Obama asked for written responses to a series of American demands concerning construction in the West Bank settlements, including East Jerusalem. Since then, Israeli cabinet discussions have yielded no such document, and relations with America are on the rocks. Seeking to sidestep further embarrassment, Netanyahu canceled his attendance at the global nuclear conference convened by Obama in mid-April, sending a deputy instead.

Recently the *Washington Post* published two articles, in the space of a week, claiming that the White House is thinking about proposing its own unilateral peace plan and seeing which side rejects it. On April 7, David Ignatius wrote that one day before the ill-fated meeting between Obama and Netanyahu, the National Security Advisor, General James Jones, gathered six of his predecessors, people who had served under presidents Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush Sr. and Clinton, to discuss an arrangement for the Middle East. Obama entered the meeting and sought their views on the subject. Brent Scowcroft, who had advised Ford and Bush Sr., urged Obama to announce a peace plan of his own. From the article it appears that Obama means to create an extremely broad consensus, including Democrats and Republicans, to promote a plan to solve the conflict.

On April 11, the second article appeared, revealing that Carter's advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, who'd had a major role in the aforementioned meeting, sent a signed article to Obama, asking him not to stop at proclaiming a peace plan, but to visit Jerusalem and Ramallah and then to announce the plan at a ceremony in Jerusalem's Old City. If Israel rejects it, wrote Brzezinski, Obama should raise it before the UN Security Council, where, if approved, it would obligate the parties.

The claim of the participants at the National Security meeting was that the general parameters of a future peace have been known for years. They include four basic points: (1) The Palestinians will yield on the refugees' right of return to Israel; instead, they'll receive compensation. (2) Israel will recognize East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. (3) The Palestinian State will be demilitarized. (4) The borders will be determined on the basis of a territorial exchange, in which the large settlement blocs will be annexed to Israel. Ignatius writes that the governments of the Ehuds, Barak and Olmert, accepted this plan, so Netanyahu's refusal may be understood as stemming from ideological rather than strategic motives.

According to the new concept in Washington, Israel's refusal harms America's vital interests, because the way to block Iranian influence in the region depends on peace with the Palestinians. America is presently losing soldiers on two major fronts, in Iraq and Afghanistan, both of which border Iran. Its reputation is severely damaged because of its unqualified support for Israel. Its regional allies, headed by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, have to cope with hostile public opinion because of their cooperation with America. It is incumbent on Israel, consequently, to reassess its position and march in step with the US strategy, which, after all, serves its existential interest.

Israeli and Palestinian impediments

On its face, the American demand appears logical. It is the US, after all, that sacrifices its sons in the war against

extremist Islam, and the price that Israel is being asked to pay does not appear overly high. Two past Israeli governments agreed to such a plan, and many Israelis are for it. But all that is mere appearance. The two PMs who accepted these parameters, Barak and Olmert, both lost power and popularity, and the parliamentary Right today has a secure majority. The prospective Obama plan would require a change in the governing coalition. If Netanyahu were to respond affirmatively, he would have to forgo his right-wing partners, bringing Kadima with Tzipi Livni into the government.

Such a step would require the blessing of Labor's Ehud Barak, current Defense Minister. True, he once proposed a very similar plan, but today it's not the same Barak. He still lives under the spell of Camp David, the failed peace conference of July 2000, which he thinks cost him his office, reduced the Labor Party, and eventually subjected him to the graces of the Likud and Kadima. What today unites Barak with Netanyahu is the opinion that there is no true partner for peace on the other side and that PA President Abu Mazen is weak in any case. Barak never tires of claiming that he "offered everything" at Camp David and got, in return, an armed Intifada, with Yasser Arafat supposedly fanning the flames.

Likewise, the results of Ariel Sharon's disengagement from Gaza in August 2005 enabled the Hamas takeover there, dragging Israel into Operation Cast Lead. This has increased Israeli skepticism all the more.

There's another impediment too. The prospective Obama plan isn't just about a peace agreement with the Palestinians. It would involve civil war in Israel. The 60,000 settlers (out of roughly half a million, including East Jerusalem) who would have to abandon their homes in the West Bank do not make up an extremist fringe they are an integral part of Israeli society. These settlers bear a large part of the burden of military service in battle units, while the leftist voters sit in Tel Aviv and shirk the draft. For this reason, Israeli agreement to the American plan, as in the days of the Olmert-Livni government, is merely theoretical. That government wasted two years in sterile negotiations, attempting to reach a "shelf" agreement, meaning one that would remain on the shelf until an unknown, propitious day when it would be possible, at last, "to rely on the Palestinians." All the while, Olmert and Livni continued building settlements, while America kept its mouth shut.

Yet the main impediment before the prospective Obama plan isn't just the political reality inside Israel, but Palestinian reality. Brzezinski's four points will not win a Palestinian consensus. Rather, they will deepen the current civil war between Fatah and Hamas. Apart from the heart of the difficulty, the refugee issue, there is also a problem with the nature of the envisioned Palestinian state. The lack of governmental stability in the PA territories derives from realities that have taken shape since the Oslo Agreement established the PA in 1993. In the wake of Israeli closure, Palestinian living standards have plummeted, while the PA fat cats thrived. The Hamas electoral victory in 2006 stemmed from bitter disappointment with Oslo.

Nothing in the prospective Obama plan would change this situation. The future Palestinian state would be a direct continuation of the PA, except its territory would increase somewhat. The settlement blocs and "Greater Jerusalem" would continue to divide the West Bank in two, but this time permanently, with American and European seals of approval. As for Gaza, there are lots of question marks. What would be its status? Who would take the power from Hamas and return it to the PA? Above all, who would ensure that in new elections, Hamas (which refuses to recognize the Oslo Accords or any signed agreement with Israel) won't win democratically, taking power in the West Bank too? There is no clear answer to these questions.

Decline of the Empire

Obama himself is caught in a contradiction. On the one hand, he is trying to present a pragmatic and liberal position, different from the aggressive foreign policy of Bush and Cheney, but on the other hand, he is determined to preserve the US as the leading capitalist power. Given the economic crisis, for which America is to blame, it suffers today from

lack of credit and not only in its dwindling coffers.

This situation contributes to Obama's foreign policy difficulties. His Afghan ally, President Hamid Karzai, is accused of corruption and election fraud, thus turning the war against the Taliban into Mission Impossible. In Iraq, the fall of Saddam Hussein has increased the influence of Iran, and Shiite fundamentalism only grew stronger in the recent elections. The US is entangled up to its ears. This enables right-wing elements to cast doubt on Obama's right to make demands on Israel. His credibility is shaken, however, not just among Israel supporters. The Arab world too has doubts concerning his motives.

How can anyone talk about peace-with-Islam while keeping a hundred thousand soldiers in Afghanistan and continuing the occupation of Iraq? How can anyone talk about peace with the Palestinians when the blockade on Gaza and the separation fence in the West Bank have turned the Territories into one big prison? If America really wants peace in the region, it will have to make a much bigger policy change. It will have to cease regarding itself as world ruler. It will have to present an example by withdrawing at once from Iraq and Afghanistan. It will have to stop conditioning aid on the choice of Salam Fayyad for the PA leadership.

Any peace agreement that does not create a sovereign Palestinian state, equal to all other states in the region, a state including not just a police force but an army ("That's a non-starter!" says Israel), with an independent economy, with free access to the rest of the world, and without a direct security relationship with Israel, will go the way of the Oslo Accords like them, it will not be worth the paper it's written on. What Obama would propose in Ramallah and the Old City of Jerusalem, if he were to follow the advice of Brzezinski, Scowcroft et al., would amount to no more than an enhanced PA. We do not need more of the same. The prospective plan, therefore, whose parameters "everyone has known for years," is the real non-starter. If enacted, it will fail not just because of refusal on the part of a right-wing Israeli government, but also because the Palestinians are fed up. They long for a life of peace and prosperity like any other people. That, for Israel, remains a non-starter.

PS:

Challenge, online 21.04.10

Challenge - A Magazine covering the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict