



GLOBAL CENTRE STAGE

Obama in Israel An Innocent Abroad?

By Emmanuel Navon

The principal objective of Obama's 2013 Middle East trip was to correct mistakes of his first-term Middle- East policy. But it remains to be seen if this otherwise successful trip will have any real impact on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

One of the first foreign policy objectives of Barak Obama after his election in January 2009 was to heel America's relations with the Muslim world. In his Cairo speech in June 2009, Obama pleaded mutual understanding and respect between the West and Islam; he strongly encouraged Muslim societies to adopt democracy; and he made it clear that America was no less supportive of Israel's security than of Palestinian statehood.

Changing the Course of US Foreign Policy

Obama was determined to change the course of America's foreign policy. In the Middle East, that meant pulling US troops out of Iraq, convincing the Arab world that the US was not their enemy, and engaging Iran. With regard to Israel, Obama differed from his predecessors by vocally denying the right of Jews to live beyond the 1949 armistice line, and by handling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by putting pressure on Israel only.

The outcome of this policy has been dismal. Iran has slammed the door in America's face and has intensified its nuclear programme despite the economic sanctions (to Obama's credit, the Iranian regime is now under more pressure than ever before). Upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia have replaced pro-American regimes with Islamist ones. Syria has descended into a cruel civil war, with Assad murdering over 70,000 of his own citizens. In Libya, the US ambassador was savagely murdered by Islamists. Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan has strengthened his ties with Iran and intensified his anti-Western rhetoric.

As for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Obama obtained a public commitment from Israel's Prime Minister for the establishment of a Palestinian state, as well as a ten-month construction freeze in Judea and in Samaria. Far from inducing the Palestinian Authority (PA) to renew negotiations, those Israeli gestures convinced PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas that Palestinian intransigence would convince the Obama administration to put more pressure on Israel. While there were far-reaching negotiations between Israel and the PA under the Bush administration (the "Annapolis Process"), the PA has shunned the negotiation table during Obama's first term.

Reviewing the Middle East Policy

President Obama had thus good reasons to conclude that his Middle-East policy needed some reassessment. Not only has Obama's first-term Middle-East policy been counter-productive, but he has also been accused of "throwing Israel under the bus." The purpose of Obama's 2013 Middle East trip was to correct mistakes and to set the record straight.

The correction came with Obama's speech in Jerusalem. While in his 2009 speech in Cairo Obama shocked Jewish ears by justifying Israel's existence with the Holocaust, his 2013 Jerusalem speech recognised Israel's 3,000 year history. Obama expressed his belief that Israel is rooted in history and tradition, and reminded his audience that the security relationship between the US and Israel has never been stronger.

Obama showed empathy and understanding. But he also made two points that are debatable.

Debatable Issues

The first debatable point has to do with demographics. "Given the demographics west of the Jordan River," he said, "the only way for Israel to endure and thrive as a Jewish and democratic state is through the realisation of an independent and viable Palestine." Obama presented this idea as a self-evident truth by adding: "That is true." But is it?

For a start, Gaza is now out of the equation, since Israel unilaterally withdrew from it in 2005. The "demographic threat" must, therefore, be gauged in pre-1967 Israel as well as in Judea and Samaria, i.e. in what is known as "the area between the River and the Sea" (referred to as "the area" in this article).

In 2013, Jews constitute a two-third majority in the area (66 percent exactly). When Israel declared its independence in 1947, there was an opposite

ratio (one third of Jews). In 1900, Jews were an eight percent minority. So far, therefore, time has been on the Jews' side. The question is whether time will continue to be on the Jews' side. Recent demographic trends suggest that the answer is positive.

Since 1992, the Arab fertility rate in Judea and Samaria has decreased significantly and consistently (it is now of 3.2 births per woman). Within pre-1967 Israel, the Arab fertility rate decreased from 9.23 in 1964 to 3.5 today. This decrease has been constant. Jewish fertility rates have also decreased since 1964, but very slightly: from 3.39 in 1964 to 3.0 today. But, more significantly, the Jewish fertility rate started increasing in the late 1990s (it was 2.62 in 1999, 2.71 in 2004, and 3.0 in 2011). The fertility gap between Jews and Arabs went from 5.84 in 1964 to 0.5 today. So the gap is closing, to the Jews' advantage. The constant increase of the Jewish fertility rate since the late 1990s is not only due to traditionally high rates among Orthodox Jews. Indeed, this rate has been increasing among secular Israelis.

The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS) has consistently overestimated Arab fertility rates and underestimated Jewish fertility rates. Yet the "demographic threat" discourse is based on the ICBS' mistaken predictions. Then there is immigration and emigration. While there have been constant waves of Jewish immigration ('Aliya') since Israel's independence, there has been a net annual emigration of Arab residents from Judea and Samaria and from Gaza in recent years: 10,000 in 2004, 25,000 in 2006, and 28,000 in 2008.

So the claim that Israel would turn into a bi-national state were it to annex Judea and Samaria is unfounded. Jews would still constitute a two-third majority, and that majority would continue to increase according to the latest demographic trends. Whether it is desirable for Israel to have a one-third minority of Arab citizens is admittedly a question that deserves to be asked, but the "bi-national threat" is groundless.

The second debatable point made by Obama has to do with the allegedly lack of justice and opportunities that the absence of Palestinian statehood entails. "It is not fair that a Palestinian child cannot grow up in a state of his own" Obama said. But what is a "Palestinian"? The "Palestinians" are not a people; they are part of the Arab nation, a nation that was arbitrarily divided by the British and the French after World War I and that has no less than 22 states. The British Mandate over Palestine was already divided in 1922: 80 percent of the Mandate went to the Arabs (now Jordan) and 20 percent to the Jews. Jordan is a Palestinian state. And the Arabs who left the British Mandate during Israel's War of Independence in 1948 ended-up as refugees in countries such as Jordan and Lebanon precisely because those countries cynically refused to integrate refugees who share the same language, the same ethnicity, and the same religion.

Obama went off script during his speech and said that Palestinian children need a state in order to succeed, to prosper and to have opportunities. But is there an Arab country where children can really prosper and have opportunities? Young people risked their lives in the street of Cairo and Tunis to get rid of their tyrants. Now they are ruled by Islamists. There is no Arab country that is truly democratic and that offers equal opportunities to its children. Why would a 23rd Arab country (the "Palestinian state") be an exception to the rule?

What is also debatable, though, is Prime Minister Netanyahu's repeated unequivocal commitment to Palestinian statehood during his press conference with President Obama. Netanyahu's new coalition of 68 Members of Knesset (MKs) includes 40 MKs that unequivocally oppose the creation of a "Palestinian state" (28 out of the 31 MKs from his ruling party, and the 12 MKs from the "Jewish Home" party). That is nearly 60 percent. Netanyahu's Likud party officially opposes the creation of a Palestinian state.

So President Obama was at the best of his charm, eloquence and brilliance. He convinced most Israelis that he didn't throw them under a bus. He showed empathy and understanding. But the bottom line of his speech in Jerusalem was unconvincing, for the reasons mentioned above. As for Netanyahu, he publicly confirmed his commitment to Palestinian statehood, although he does not have a coalition to translate his words into deeds.

It is, therefore, unlikely that this otherwise successful trip will have a real impact on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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