

## **The Coming Obama-Netanyahu Duel**

By Patrick Seale

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Fresh from his electoral victory and preparing to embark in January on his second term, President Barack Obama should now be planning how to rein in Israel, halt and reverse its land- grab on the West Bank and bring to birth a Palestinian state. That is what the Arab and Muslim world is expecting of him – as well as every person of goodwill concerned for peace in the Middle East.

But can he do it? The obstacles are formidable. The United States itself is profoundly divided on the issue. It has become a country where Islamophobia is rampant. Powerful Jewish financial interests, lobbies and pundits in the media and the think-tanks will surely raise hell if Obama is seen to be departing ever so slightly from the consensus of an ‘unshakable’ U.S.-Israeli alliance. Great swathes of evangelicals, fervent Christian Zionists, remain committed to Israel’s exclusive ownership of the Holy Land. Above all, the Republican-controlled U.S. House of Representatives is very much in the Israeli camp. Obama needs to work closely with Congress to seek compromises on urgent domestic issues, not least the level of the federal debt. Would it be politic in such circumstances for him to tackle the highly contentious Israel-Palestinian question?

In Israel, Binyamin Netanyahu’s Likud has formed an alliance with Yisrael Beiteinu, Avigdor Lieberman’s nationalist political party, to fight next January’s elections. Any government emerging from this hard-line grouping will be more determined than ever to press for a ‘Greater Israel’ while denying the Palestinians any prospect of statehood. As Israel’s peace camp languishes, fanatical forces are on the rise consisting of violent and unrestrained settlers, religious nationalists and various other species of racist, died-in-the-wool right-wingers. In 1995, Yitzhak Rabin - the last Israeli prime minister seriously to consider peace with the Palestinians - was murdered by a right-wing, ultra-Orthodox Jewish fanatic. What Israeli leader – indeed what American President – would dare run the same risk?

Great as they are, these are not the only barriers to a bold American drive for a fair Arab-Israeli settlement. Also restraining any American attempt to moderate Israeli policy are the deep inter-governmental and corporate ties forged over many years between the two countries, especially in the fields of defence and intelligence. In these key areas of national security, the U.S. has few secrets from Israel. In addition, there are the numerous pledges which Israel and its many American friends – from Henry Kissinger to Dennis Ross – have wrung out of subsequent American administrations, such as the pledge to guarantee Israel's military superiority over all its neighbours, near and far, together with the promise never to make any move on the peace front without first consulting Israel.

In other words, any American President proposing to promote a fair and balanced peace in the Middle East will find himself bound hand and foot before he even sets forth on such a perilous venture.

And yet... and yet there is little doubt that Obama knows what needs to be done. If Israel's settlement expansion is not checked and if the Palestinians do not get their state in Obama's second term, the two-state solution must finally be declared dead, releasing a tsunami of hate, frustration and a thirst for revenge which will be difficult to control – directed as much against the U.S. as Israel. How long can Israel continue to occupy and gobble up the West Bank without facing a third Intifada and international condemnation? This past week provided yet another reminder of the extremely dangerous Israeli-Gaza confrontation. Israel has dramatically escalated the crisis by assassinating the Hamas military chief, Ahmad Jabari – a killing which seems bound to provoke a violent response. Jabari's son and several other Palestinians, including a child, were killed in the targeted air strike. It is as if Israel were seeking a pretext to invade Gaza yet again. But how many more times can Israel invade Gaza to destroy 'terrorists' who dare defend themselves? When will Israel choose to make peace with its neighbours rather than always seek to subdue them by brute force? Is it not time for the United States to discipline its unruly ally?

'For this is by no means only a Middle Eastern problem... This is by no means only a Middle Eastern problem. Vital American interests are at stake. The 'unshakable' alliance with Israel has left the United States vulnerable to Arab and Muslim anger in a vast stretch of territory from Afghanistan to Yemen. The United States has never fully considered why

it was attacked on 9/11. The reasons were many: they included the callous abandonment of the *mujaheddin* once the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1987 -- fighters whom the U.S. had itself recruited and armed; the brutal punishment of Iraq during and after the first Gulf war of 1991; more generally, the militarisation of American foreign policy. But that was not all. High on the list of Arab and Muslim grievances was Palestine, as Osama bin Laden himself declared. The unresolved Palestinian conflict remains a running sore fuelling hostility to the United States and eating away at its interests and reputation.

Obama knows that the current Islamic upsurge in the Arab world poses a major challenge to the U.S. presence and influence there. The only way the United States can restore its battered reputation is to broker an Arab-Israeli peace, with a Palestinian state at its very heart. That was the thrust behind Obama's Cairo speech of June 2009. He was defeated by Netanyahu, but he must surely try again, whatever the immense difficulties.

Israel has identified Iran as its most dangerous enemy. But Iran's anti-Israeli militancy would be quieted down overnight if Israel were to make an honourable peace with the Palestinians. If Obama wants a 'win-win' deal with Iran, which will end the threat of nuclear proliferation and restore America's relations with Tehran after thirty years of senseless hostility, the way to get there is by an Israeli-Palestinian settlement.

Why are Israel and Iran at daggers' drawn? Primarily, because of Israel's pitiless repression of the Palestinians, for whom Iranians, like most Muslims, have great sympathy. There are, of course, other reasons for their mutual hostility. Iran is under constant threat of Israeli attack and is the butt of violent Israeli denunciation. Israel, in turn, has faced offensive Iranian rhetoric. Yet another crucial reason is that Israel conceives of its national security in terms of weakening -- or preferably destroying -- any neighbour which seems, however remotely, to present a threat. Iraq was Israel's first target, which it persuaded the United States to destroy. Now it is Iran's turn to face an Israeli-incited American onslaught. Syria, Iran's ally, is self-destructing. But once its destruction is complete, Israel will no doubt turn its lethal attention once more to Hamas in Gaza and Hizballah

in Lebanon, who refuse to submit and lie down. Will Saudi Arabia and the Gulf be the next targets of Israeli aggression?

Obama has many pressing foreign policy problems including the 'pivot' of American military power to the Far East to contain the rising challenge from China. But he cannot afford to neglect the Arab and Muslim world. That is where the United States faces an immediate challenge, even more pressing than that of China. Obama's difficult but essential task in his second term will be to bring peace to the tormented Middle East. The only way to do so is to place America above the fray, able to deal with all the various warring parties without prejudice or bias.

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