

Obama is Courting Danger in the Middle East

By Patrick Seale

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U.S. President Barack Obama is behaving in the Middle East as if unaware of the dangers his policies are provoking. It is often said that big ships cannot easily or swiftly change course, but the U.S. ship of state is steaming headlong towards an iceberg. The collision could make 9/11 seem like a traffic accident. To protect America, its interests and its allies will require bold corrective measures – and the earlier in his second term the better.

Recent figures have caught the world's attention – 162 Palestinians killed and a thousand wounded in Gaza compared to six Israelis killed and a dozen wounded; 138 votes cast at the UN General Assembly in favour of Palestine's upgrade to the status of a non-member observer state, with only nine votes against – Israel, the United States, Canada, the Czech Republic, Panama and four small Pacific Island states.

Striking as these figures are – illustrating the disproportionate casualties in the recent Gaza conflict and the increasing international isolation of Israel and the United States -- they do not tell the whole story. Bubbling beneath the surface like molten lava lies something which cannot be counted. It is hate. In my more than four decades of writing about the Middle East and talking to Arabs, I have rarely encountered such detestation of Israel, such thirst for revenge and such rage at its superpower patron.

When populations are oppressed, occupied, besieged and murdered, their land stolen, their rights and national identity denied, brute force may manage to quell and subdue them momentarily. But when they eventually rebel, as they must, the eruption is bound to be violent.

The whole world knows that Israel's right-wing leaders want land not peace – a view enthusiastically shared by settlers and other fanatics. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and those like him have done everything possible

to avoid a negotiation with the Palestinians since any negotiation carries the risk of checking progress towards their goal of a 'Greater Israel'. Such right-wingers loathe Palestinian moderates like Mahmud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, because moderates want peace and an end to Israel's land theft. Israeli right-wingers far prefer Palestinian militants like Hamas, whom they can dismiss as terrorists with whom no talks are possible. 'How can you negotiate with someone who wants to kill you?' is a familiar right-wing Israeli cry. Israel's policy has always been to discredit the moderates and radicalise the militants. A striking recent example was its assassination of Ahmad al-Jabari, Hamas' military chief, just when he was on the point of agreeing to a permanent ceasefire with Israel. As Reuven Pedatsur wrote in Haaretz, 'Israel assassinated the man who had the power to make a deal with Israel.'

Yet the question must be posed: How can a tiny country of seven million people believe that it can permanently defy hundreds of millions of Arabs, Iranians and Turks and the vast Muslim world beyond? Only the United States can save Israel from the suicidal folly of its leaders. But the U.S. must also act to protect itself against what will inevitably be a violent backlash if it fails to rein in the inflated ambitions of its ally. Peace and peace alone will secure Israel's future and protect the United States from the threat of an Arab counter-blow.

The events of 9/11 were a harsh wake-up call which the United States has still not fully heeded. The current wave of fierce anti-American feeling in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and many other parts of the Muslim world is another red alert which the U.S. should surely note. There have been several such omens in the past. Shi'i anger at American backing for Israel after its 1982 invasion of Lebanon led to the car-bomb attack which killed 241 U.S. Marines at Beirut airport on 23 October 1983. Another warning was the attack on the *USS Cole* in Aden harbour on 12 October 2000, which killed 17 U.S. sailors, and triggered an American counter-insurgency which is claiming lives to this day. The killing of U.S. ambassador Chris Stevens in Benghazi on 12 September 2012 threw a harsh light on how Islamists view the United States. And was not the recent UN vote on the status of Palestine yet another reminder of what the world thinks of American policies on this highly contentious issue?

Obama's moment of truth will soon be upon him. He will need to make some painful choices which will profoundly affect America's security as well as its standing in the world. Are American values really compatible with the deeply-rooted expansionist ideology and Arab-hating world view of Israel's fanatical settlers and religious nationalists? Does the United States really want to be on the side of racists and fascists who harass and kill Palestinians, torch their fields, cut down ancient olive trees and deface mosques?

Obama has been criticised for not visiting Israel. Early next year would be the time to do so. If both 'hard' and 'soft' power cannot be used to persuade Israel to change course, might a dose of 'smart' power be more effective? Obama needs to spell out America's terms for a final closure of the poisonous Arab-Israeli conflict, which has destroyed America's reputation and brought horrendous punishment to the American mainland. He needs to secure the backing of world powers for an international conference which will dictate to the parties the peace terms of the world community. He must use the powers of the Presidency to impose a two-state solution and bring peace to the deeply troubled Middle East -- before it is too late.

Pessimists argue that Obama is tired of the Middle East and that he cannot face a bitter fight with the pro-Israeli Congress, let alone with the powerful ranks of neo-cons and pro-Israeli lobbyists. It is said that he does not want to risk another humiliation such as he suffered at Netanyahu's hands when he tried to press for a settlement freeze early in his first mandate. In any event, he seems to believe that, whatever he does or does not do, the oil-rich Arabs will always side with the United States. His strong belief is that the real challenge for the United States in the years ahead will be confronting the rise of China. Priority must be given to affirming American power in the Pacific rather than in the Mediterranean and the Gulf.

Optimists, in contrast, persist in hoping – against all the evidence -- that Obama will surprise the Middle East and the world with some bold decisions. They believe he is biding his time before showing his hand. He wants first to form his new cabinet – including naming the new Secretaries of State and Defence. And he will no doubt wish to ponder the results of next January's Israeli elections to gauge just how tough and tricky a problem he will be facing there.

The next couple of months will show whether or not Obama will earn his place in history and deserve his Nobel Prize.

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