

At AIPAC, Obama outlines policy shift to defend US, Israeli interests

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11 June 2008

In his June 4 speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the largest pro-Israeli lobby group in Washington, presumptive Democratic Party presidential candidate Barack Obama made clear his commitment to the defense of US as well as Israeli imperialist interests, while proposing a more flexible mixture of diplomacy, threats and military force than that employed by the Bush administration.

After being denounced last month as an “appeaser” by Bush during the president’s tour of the Middle East, Obama was at pains to make clear that the tactical shift he advocates would benefit both US imperialism and Israeli state interests.

He began with a statement of support for Israel’s oppression of the Palestinians, saying: “We know the establishment of Israel was just and necessary, rooted in centuries of struggle and decades of patient work. But 60 years later, we know that we cannot relent, we cannot yield, and as president I will never compromise when it comes to Israel’s security.”

Opposing all Palestinian claims to Jerusalem, he said: “Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided.” He supported the Bush administration’s policy of refusing to negotiate with the elected Hamas government in the Gaza Strip.

Obama pledged to maintain the massive level of US military assistance to Israel, saying he would continue “ensuring Israel’s qualitative military advantage” over other countries in the region, and adding that he would implement a memorandum of understanding guaranteeing \$30 billion in assistance to Israel over the next decade.

He pointed out, however, that current US Middle East policy has led to significant setbacks for both US and Israeli interests—notably the failure of Israel’s US-backed invasion of Lebanon in the summer of 2006 and

the election of a Hamas government in the Gaza Strip in February of that year.

He declared: “I don’t think any of us can be satisfied that America’s recent foreign policy has made Israel more secure. Hamas now controls Gaza. Hezbollah has tightened its grip on southern Lebanon and is flexing its muscles in Beirut. Because of the war in Iraq, Iran—which always posed a greater threat to Israel than Iraq—is emboldened and poses the greatest strategic challenge to the United States and Israel in the Middle East in a generation.”

He proposed an adjustment of US foreign policy, including direct negotiations with Iran, saying: “We will use all elements of American power to pressure Iran.... This starts with aggressive, principled, tough diplomacy without self-defeating preconditions, but with a clear-eyed understanding of our interests.”

Notwithstanding the opinions of Obama’s more self-deluded liberal supporters, such as the *Nation*—which wrote that that he exhibited a “more humane and wise approach to foreign policy”—the policy outlined by the Democratic candidate does not represent a real break from the Bush administration’s politics of war and provocation.

There is nothing either pacifist or anti-imperialist about it. It is, in fact, no less ruthless in its pursuit of US imperialist interests—and no less hostile to the aspirations of the Palestinian masses—than the policy of Bush and McCain. Rather, Obama argued before AIPAC, he proposes a more intelligent and competent execution of imperialist *Realpolitik*.

Obama promised he would “always keep the threat of military action on the table to defend our security and our ally Israel.” In other words, his proposed negotiations with Iran would take place with Iran under the constant threat of US attack.

Obama's main innovation is the cynical calculation that the show of diplomacy he proposes will make it easier, should Washington decide to attack Iran, to corral US and world public opinion behind a wider Middle East war. He said: "Sometimes there are no alternatives to confrontation. But that only makes diplomacy more important. If we must use military force, we are more likely to succeed, and will have far greater support at home and abroad, if we have exhausted our diplomatic efforts. That is the change we need in our foreign policy."

As an example of the sort of deal he might propose to Iran, Obama said: "We will present a clear choice. If you abandon your dangerous nuclear program, your support for terror, and your threats to Israel, there will be meaningful incentives—including the lifting of sanctions and political and economic integration with the international community. If you refuse, we will ratchet up the pressure."

Obama's call for a new tack in relations with Iran reflects not only concerns about Iran, but also deep dissatisfaction within the US ruling elite over the Bush administration's conduct of the Iraq war. His call for talks with Iran is of a piece with his support for reducing the US military presence in Iraq and redeploying American forces to Afghanistan.

Having installed in Baghdad a Shiite fundamentalist regime with close historical relations to Iran, the US bourgeoisie finds itself on the horns of a dilemma. Iraq no longer plays its traditional role as a military counterweight to Iran in the region, and the US faces significant opposition within its own puppet regime in Iraq to an aggressive policy against Iran.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and other government officials have publicly criticized US Iran policy. Maliki welcomed Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during a state visit to Baghdad in March. Last month, his government pulled out of a US-backed offensive against the Shiite Mahdi Army in the Sadr City neighborhood in Baghdad, requesting that Tehran broker a truce instead.

Obama noted: "Keeping all of our troops tied down indefinitely in Iraq is not the way to weaken Iran—it is precisely what has strengthened it. It is a policy for staying, not a policy for victory. I have proposed a responsible, phased redeployment of our troops from Iraq."

Obama's reasoning is in line with significant sections of the US foreign policy establishment, notably represented by the 2006 Iraq Study Group, who view Bush administration policy as a disaster and hope that a less overtly aggressive posture towards Iran will lessen Washington's international isolation—both by reducing the hostility of the Middle Eastern masses towards the US and by pushing other governments to side with US policy.

Obama said: "If Iran fails to change course when presented with this choice by the US, it will be clear ... that the Iranian regime is the author of its own isolation. That will strengthen our hand with Russia and China as we insist on stronger sanctions in the Security Council. And we should work with Europe, Japan, and the Gulf states to find every avenue outside the UN to isolate the Iranian regime."

Obama has long supported redeploying US troops from Iraq to Afghanistan and taking a harder line on neighboring Pakistan—both countries on Iran's eastern border. Such moves would strengthen the US military encirclement of Iran and place US forces athwart the land routes connecting Iran to its main trading partners in Asia.



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