

Obama offers nothing to the Palestinians

Jean Shaoul
25 May 2009

His three hour meeting last week in the White House with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made clear that President Barack Obama has no more intention of acting as an “honest broker” to secure a settlement with the Palestinians than his predecessor, George W. Bush.

At a press conference Obama reaffirmed the “special relationship” between the US and Israel, spoke repeatedly about the importance of a two state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict and described the talks as “extraordinarily productive”. But his only contribution to the issue was to call on Israel to stop expanding the settlements in the West Bank in the interest of getting peace talks off the ground and to allow reconstruction aid into the Gaza Strip to enable the rebuilding of homes and infrastructure destroyed by Israel during its offensive earlier this year.

However, Obama did not demand that Israel withdraw from the West Bank and East Jerusalem, territories it had captured during the 1967 Six-Day War. Neither did he insist that Israel allow the Palestinians freedom of movement, remove the Wall or the 600 or more road blocks that prevent Palestinians from attending to their crops, getting to work, school and university, accessing education and healthcare or even seeing their families.

Much less did he call for Israel to end its illegal blockade of Gaza, which has destroyed its economy and rendered its population destitute. Even the amount of humanitarian supplies Israel claims it is allowing through is far less than last year.

He has no perspective for a Palestinian state in any meaningful sense of the word. A Palestinian entity under these conditions would have no semblance of independence. It would remain a collection of Bantustans with no territorial contiguity, penned in behind the infamous Wall and policed by Israel’s armed forces—nothing more than a prison camp for a captive population. Like Gaza, it would be totally controlled by Israel. Its putative government would be no more than Israel’s subcontractors as prison guards.

Whatever his differences with Netanyahu’s coalition government—the most right wing in Israel’s history—he gave his imprimatur to Israel’s continuing oppression of the Palestinians.

Last month, the US agreed to sell Israel the land-based Phalanx

weapon system, first used in Iraq, to defend against the crude short range Qassam rockets and mortars fired from the Gaza Strip.

Obama was extraordinarily deferential to Netanyahu. He praised his “youth and wisdom” and announced, “I’m confident that he’s going to seize this moment.”

“And I shared with the prime minister the fact that under the Road Map, under Annapolis, there is a clear understanding that we have to make progress on settlements,” he continued. “That settlements have to be stopped in order for us to move forward. The fact is that if the people of Gaza have no hope, if they can’t even get clean water at this point, if the border closures are so tight that it is impossible for reconstruction and humanitarian efforts to take place, then that is not going to be a recipe for Israel’s long-term security or a constructive peace track to move forward.”

Netanyahu would have none of it. He agreed to restart the Palestinian peace process “immediately,” but refused to even mention the phrase the “two-state solution,” which Obama said was the goal.

“My view is less one of terminology than substance,” he said, going on to add numerous pre-conditions for any final settlement. “If ... the Palestinians recognize Israel as the Jewish state, if they fight terror, they educate their children for peace and for a better future, then I think we can come to a substantive solution that allows the two peoples to live side by side in security and peace.”

Netanyahu said that Israelis “want them to govern themselves” but “*absent a handful of powers that could endanger the state of Israel.*” [Emphasis added]

He refused to make a public commitment to Obama’s call to end the expansion of the settlements and allow reconstruction aid into Gaza. Just the day before the meeting, the government advertised for tenders to build the first 20 homes in Maskiot, one of the most contentious in the West Bank. While Israel agreed under the Bush’s Road Map not to build new settlements in the West Bank, it refused to accept the plan’s requirement to halt all building in existing settlements. Settlers and Israeli leaders simply argue that Maskiot does not constitute a new settlement because it has been used as a military prep school for years.

As the talks took place, Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, swore in a new government headed by Salaam Fayyad, the previous prime minister, who is Washington and Tel Aviv’s preferred candidate. Full of businessmen and “technocrats”, the new government’s composition precludes any possibility of reconciliation between the rival Palestinian factions, Fatah and Hamas, and thus ensures the continuing political

division between the West Bank and Gaza.

Obama and Netanyahu issued no joint statement after the meeting, which is one of a series that Obama is holding with Middle East leaders. Earlier in the month, he met Jordan's King Abdullah and is scheduled to meet Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas this week in Washington.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was also expected to fly to Washington this week, but is believed to be seriously ill and unable to travel. The Egyptian authorities, who are concerned over the issue of Mubarak's successor, claimed that Mubarak was grieving over the death of his grandson whose funeral he did not attend.

The promise by Bush of a Palestinian state was never more than a sop to US stooges in the region—Abdullah in Jordan, Mubarak in Egypt and Abdullah in Saudi Arabia—to make the war and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and any action against Iran more palatable. The rulers themselves, whose own interests are threatened by a Palestinian state, play lip service to the notion because of the intense anger felt by their people at Israeli's brutal oppression of the Palestinians and their leaders' complicity in it.

Far from breaking with the Bush administration, much of Obama's foreign policy has followed on, even extending the war in Afghanistan to neighbouring Pakistan. The question of Palestine is no different.

During his election campaign, Obama repeatedly said that he would make a Palestinian state a top priority of his foreign policy and that a resolution of the long running conflict was the key to his larger goal of stabilising the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and defeating terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda. Since his meeting with Netanyahu, Obama seems to have put the Israel Palestine conflict on the back burner once more. According to the Israeli website, *Debka File*, the White House has denied that the US president would use his June 4 speech in Cairo to launch a new Middle East peace plan, something that had been widely trialled in the media. It also says that Obama did not demand the re-partition of Jerusalem, an issue that had been reported in the press; neither was he keen to pursue the Palestinian issue at all at this time.

Obama's pose of a conciliatory approach to Palestine was primarily determined by the US approach to Iran. He rejected Netanyahu's position that Israel could not be expected to pursue a peace deal with Palestinians when it faced an "existential threat" from Iran, which would soon have nuclear weapons, particularly when it sponsors Hamas which controls Gaza, and Hezbollah, which has a veto in Lebanon's government and is expected to expand its support in the elections in two weeks' time.

"If there is a linkage between Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, I personally believe it actually runs the other way," Obama said. "To the extent that we can make peace ... between the Palestinians and the Israelis, then I actually think it strengthens our

hand in the international community in dealing with the potential Iranian threat."

After Iran's elections are completed next month, he said, "We are hopeful that ... there is going to be a serious process of engagement, first with the P5 Plus 1 process, which is already in place; potentially through additional direct talks between the United States and Iran."

"We should have a fairly good sense by the end of the year as to whether they are moving in the right direction and whether the parties involved are making progress and that there's a good-faith effort to resolve differences," he went on.

At the same time, he stressed that the dangers posed by Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons was such that, without imposing an "artificial deadline ... we're not going to have talks forever. We're not going to create a situation in which the talks become an excuse for inaction while Iran proceeds with developing and deploying a nuclear weapon."

Washington would proceed to seek international support for tougher sanctions against Iran, Obama said: "I assured the prime minister that we are not foreclosing a range of steps, including much stronger international sanctions, in assuring that Iran understand that we are serious".

Netanyahu tried to broaden this formulation to include possible military action, saying, "I very much appreciate, Mr. President, your firm commitment to ensure that Iran does not develop nuclear military capability, and also your statement that you're leaving all options on the table."



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