

Obama's diplomatic offensive in the Middle East

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President Barack Obama's diplomatic offensive in the Middle East, portrayed as a peace mission, is aimed at restoring Washington's position and influence in pursuit of its geo-strategic interests.

The Obama administration is seeking the establishment of a truncated and weak Palestinian entity, an improvement in relations with Syria, and the curbing of Iran's growing influence in the region. In line with these goals, the US wants to secure agreement with its key ally, Israel, for a freeze on the expansion of settlements and acceptance of a Palestinian statelet underwritten by the Arab states. However, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu heads perhaps the most right-wing government in Israel's history and is politically dependent on ultra-nationalist settlers and far-right parties hostile to all of these objectives and opposed to any concessions to Syria or Iran.

No less than four senior US officials have visited Israel in the last week: the US special envoy for Israeli-Palestinian relations, George Mitchell, who also travelled to Syria, Egypt, Ramallah and Bahrain; the national security advisor, James Jones; the National Security Council senior director for the Middle East and special envoy for the Persian Gulf, Dennis Ross; and the defence secretary, Robert Gates, who also went to Jordan and Iraq.

Their success in dictating terms to Israel was limited.

Israel's fascist foreign secretary, Avigdor Lieberman of Yisrael Beiteinu, is *persona non grata* with the Obama administration. He was despatched on a ten-day visit to Latin America, leaving Defence Secretary Ehud Barak to lead the talks on the Israeli side.

Mitchell held a two-and-a-half hour meeting with Netanyahu on Monday, without advisors or secretaries on either side. After the meeting, there was no mention of Israel agreeing to a freeze on settlement construction. Netanyahu had previously rejected any such freeze, arguing that "natural growth" of the settlements must be allowed. He has also rejected any curb on building in Arab East Jerusalem.

Two days after Mitchell left Israel there was a report that Netanyahu had halted a single building project in East Jerusalem.

Mitchell also went to Ramallah to meet Mahmoud Abbas, the Fatah president of the US-backed Palestinian Authority, to try and restart talks later this year. Abbas has little popular support and Fatah is riven with conflicts. Earlier this month, the veteran Fatah leader in exile, Farouq al-Qaddumi, accused Abbas of conspiring with Israel and the US to poison Yasser Arafat, who died in November 2004 of unknown causes.

Obama has made clear all that is on offer is a bifurcated state of Gaza and the West Bank, which would consist of several non-contiguous blocks penned in behind by an eight metre high concrete wall and controlled by Israel.

Fatah, which controls the West Bank, is locked in a bitter power struggle with Hamas, which controls Gaza. For years, Washington and Israel have worked to deepen the political divisions in Palestine, making financial support for Abbas dependent on a ruthless crackdown on Hamas supervised by US Lieutenant General Keith Dayton, who is the real power in the West Bank. More than 1,000 Hamas activists are held without trial in the West Bank, and assassinations, torture and raids on Hamas' welfare facilities and institutions are commonplace, as are reprisals against Fatah in Gaza.

Rabie Latifah of the Palestinian Human Rights organisation Al Haq told Inter Press Service News Agency, "We don't have a police state here in Palestine. We have two police states. One in Gaza and one in the West Bank." He added, "If the situation continues, there is a possibility of a civil uprising in both Palestinian territories against their respective governments."

Before meeting with Netanyahu, Mitchell went to Syria, his second visit in a month. He is keen to broker an agreement between Israel and Syria that would cut off support for Syria's allies, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, normalise relations between Israel and Lebanon and isolate Iran.

Mitchell began talks with Syria in June shortly after the elections in Lebanon resulted in a narrow majority for the pro-US alliance against Hezbollah and the pro-Syrian coalition. Former President Jimmy Carter met Syrian President Bashar Assad and Hamas leaders in Damascus days earlier.

Mitchell said that Syria plays an "integral" role in regional peace. Soon after his June visit, the US State Department announced that Obama would be sending an ambassador to Damascus for the first time since the 2005 assassination of

former Lebanese premier, Rafik Hariri, which the US attributed to Syria. A UN investigation has been unable to substantiate US claims and four pro-Syrian Lebanese generals were released in May.

Talks between Israel and Syria over the return of the Golan Heights captured by Israel in the 1967 war broke down in early 2000 when Israel refused Syria access to Lake Tiberias. Since then, support for withdrawal from the Golan and the normalisation of relations with Syria in Israel has declined.

For Syria, the return of the Golan is the *sine qua non* of any deal. In addition, Damascus does not want to jeopardise its relationship with Tehran, formalised in 2006 with a mutual defence pact and subsequent economic and cultural links, without agreement on a number of issues. It seeks the removal of Syria from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, the end of US economic sanctions, and a new economic and political rapprochement with the West and with the Arab states.

Mitchell told Syria that the US was determined to achieve a “truly comprehensive” peace settlement that includes normal relations between Israel and all of its Arab neighbours. He described his talks with Assad as “very candid and positive.”

While Obama seems willing to reach some kind of accommodation with Syria, more hawkish elements are urging continued economic sanctions, a continued UN investigation into Hariri’s assassination, and a wider probe by the International Atomic Energy Agency into Al Kibar. Israel bombed Syrian military facilities near Al Kibar in September 2007, claiming Syria was building a nuclear plant.

Washington has thus far publicly refused to deal with the elected Hamas government, although its leader in Damascus, Khaled Meshaal, has accepted the idea of a Palestinian state based on the pre-1967 borders. But in Egypt, Mitchell attempted to broker a deal between Fatah and Hamas.

Washington is also trying to get Egypt to modify the Arab peace plan of 2002, but Egypt was unable to move the Arab League on this. The plan calls for a Palestinian state on the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem; Israel’s withdrawal to its 1967 borders; and acceptance of the Palestinians’ right of return to their homes in Israel, or compensation in lieu, in return for normalising relations with the Arab world. None of these conditions is acceptable to Israel.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates, whom Obama has kept on from the Bush cabinet, also met Netanyahu and Barak to discuss relations with Iran, the US diplomatic initiative and joint military issues.

Both Israel and the US claim that Iran is within one to three years of being able to develop nuclear weapons. Obama has given Iran until late September to accept an offer of talks, and until the end of the year to show some progress on the nuclear issue. Israel, on the other hand, is in favour of early and swift military strikes against Iran’s nuclear facilities, and has repeatedly expressed its intention of carrying out such strikes, as it did against Iraq in 1981.

Gates and top Pentagon officials, including Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have said repeatedly that an Israeli strike on Iran would destabilise the region and precipitate a wider conflagration. The head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, General Mohammad Ali Jafari, warned last week that Iran would respond to any attack. “Our rockets have the precision capabilities to target all the Israeli nuclear sites,” he threatened.

Just a few weeks ago, Vice President Joseph Biden stressed that the United States “cannot dictate” Israel’s decision on military action. Such a position is clearly absurd. Israel would need permission to overfly Iraqi airspace, which the US controls, and Israel is entirely dependent upon the US financially, militarily and politically.

Washington routinely dictates to other, much larger nations what they should and should not do. So far as the US “cannot dictate” to Israel, it is because the Obama administration wants only cosmetic shifts in its foreign policy and is, even so, politically divided on how far Jerusalem should be pushed. As always, moreover, Obama remains determined to secure Republican agreement on US foreign policy objectives.

In all fundamentals, the US remains firmly allied with Israel. Thus, while Obama told CNN that the United States was “absolutely not” giving Israel approval for a strike, Gates promised that there would be no let-up in US military support for Israel. “We will continue to ensure that Israel has the most advanced weapons for its national defence,” he said.

After his talks with Israel, Gates left for Jordan, where he said that the US would seek much tougher UN sanctions if Tehran rejected Washington’s offer of engagement.

Netanyahu refused to rule out an Israeli strike against Iran. He issued a statement saying, “Gates stated that the US and Israel see eye-to-eye regarding the Iranian nuclear threat.” He reiterated “the seriousness with which Israel views Iran’s nuclear ambitions and the need to utilize all available means to prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear weapons capability.”



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