

Obama's Grand Plan for the Middle East

by
Gidon D. Remba

As published in the *Jerusalem Report*, May 18, 2009

The Arab League, together with the Palestinians, and the U.S.-led Quartet, together with Israel, will become the primary interlocutors in new negotiations on a Palestinian-Israeli accord.

With the maiden visit of newly elected Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Washington set for May 18, signs of an immanent clash between U.S. President Barack Obama and the hardline Israeli leader abound.

While both leaders will look to find common ground, papering over differences with diplomatic formulas, the rift may be unavoidable. The impending tension recalls previous encounters between Likud leaders and U.S. presidents from both parties. This time the tremors will center not only on the Palestinian fault line, but also on Iran.

Netanyahu views the development of an Iranian uranium enrichment capacity as an existential threat to Israel that must be squelched. He is certain that Obama's "dialogue" with Iran is bound to fail, rendering inevitable an Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear sites. An Israeli attack will be preceded by more punishing economic penalties on Iran of the kind mooted lately on Capitol Hill, and backed by AIPAC, the hawkish pro-Israel lobby. But sanctions-on-steroids are unlikely to blunt Iran's quest to join the nuclear club, serving only to clear away the final hurdles blocking a final push for preemptive Israeli military action.

Obama's way represents nothing less than a revolution in the Middle East: not the stillborn new Middle East the Bush Administration imagined could be midwived by the force of American and Israeli arms, but a new order that will arise from the centripetal forces unleashed by a political earthquake. How does Obama hope to set in motion this tectonic realignment? Reading the tea leaves, one can divine an unfolding pattern whose contours will only be more fully revealed when Obama delivers a major speech to the Arab and Muslim worlds in Egypt on June 4, following meetings with Netanyahu, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

With the backing of the Pentagon's top brass and his Republican Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Obama's administration is convinced that a military strike against Iran will engulf the region in a raging firestorm. It believes that an Israeli air attack on Iranian nuclear sites will fall short, accelerating the Iranian nuclear weapons program, part of which will remain intact underground. Netanyahu hopes to persuade Obama that, if all else fails, the U.S. must turn its gunsights on Iran. But Obama will be immovable: he will not launch the next catastrophic Mideast war.

On the contrary, Obama believes a negotiated solution to the nuclear issue may be in the cards if the U.S. treads an untried path with Iran. He may offer to create a multinational consortium to produce enriched uranium inside Iran under international management and supervision, with an enhanced verification system to ensure that weaponization does not take place. Israel too may be pressed to declare its nuclear capabilities, subjecting them, along with those of India and Pakistan, to international oversight and inspection. In return for a mutually acceptable resolution of the nuclear impasse, Iran may be willing to scale back its military aid to the Lebanese Hizballah and Palestinian Hamas militant organizations and accept a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace accord,

which could include Lebanon. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has now offered, on American television, to support whatever peace plan is accepted by the Palestinian people and the international community.

Obama's aim is the creation of a new regional political architecture in which Israel's vital needs, and American national security, will be more firmly anchored than ever before.

Should U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations fail, Obama hopes to transform the regional landscape in which Iran would emerge with a nuclear arms capacity in such a way that deterrence would be most likely to succeed. Even without a “grand bargain,” the U.S. will seek to foster cooperation with Iran in as many areas as possible, replacing confrontation with détente, from a position of greater regional leverage. Those in the regime who seek to project Iran’s influence in the Arab and Muslim worlds by backing Hizballah and Hamas “resistance” against Israel will have the rug pulled out from under their feet.

Obama hopes to woo Syria out of Iran’s orbit with economic and political incentives and a determination to broker a peace treaty between Israel and Syria as part of a grand rapprochement between Israel and the Arab and Muslim worlds. The U.S. will loosen Iranian bonds with Syria and Hamas – which has now offered a long-term truce with Israel – while depriving Hizballah and its Iranian backers of the tinder for their incendiary tactics. Contrary to pundits who cry that Israel will be sacrificed on the altar of American reconciliation with the Islamic world, Obama’s aim is the creation of a new regional political architecture in which Israel’s vital needs, and American national security, will be more firmly anchored than ever before.

For Obama, the Israel-Arab conflict, including the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum, can and must be moved towards resolution under American stewardship. Press reports suggest that the U.S. and Arab allies Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are working on revising the Arab League Peace Initiative, making explicit key compromises on Jerusalem and the refugee problem. They would make Israel an offer it will be hard pressed to refuse: Palestinian refugees would return only to the new state of Palestine or be rehabilitated within the Arab states or other countries. This would insure that refugee repatriation could not undermine Israel’s Jewish majority or the principle of “two states for two peoples” affirmed in the original 1947 U.N. partition resolution calling for an Arab and a Jewish state in Palestine. Gaining Arab unanimity on this radioactive issue may prove impossible. But even engineering the sponsorship of a group of leading Arab states for so far-reaching a change to the historic Arab position would represent a coup for Obama.

Jerusalem’s Old City, with its holy sites sacred to Judaism, Islam and Christianity, objects of both Israeli and Palestinian national identification, would come under international supervision, as proposed in the partition resolution. Arab and Muslim states would begin normalizing relations with Israel, in exchange for concrete Israeli steps like a comprehensive settlement building freeze, and a time-table for removing most West Bank settlers, designed to send the message to Palestinians and the Arab world that Israel is committed not only in word but in deed to realizing a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Arab League, together with the Palestinians, and the U.S.-led Quartet, together with Israel, will become the primary interlocutors in the new negotiations. By adopting a novel holistic, regional framework, and clarifying the parameters of the Arab peace initiative and the way forward to its realization, Obama raises the odds higher than ever before that the players will at last overcome four great obstacles which have thus far stood in the way of a Palestinian-Israeli accord:

1. With the Arab League as the primary Arab interlocutor, Obama's way helps bypass one consequence of Palestinian weakness and division, creating an environment in which the Palestinians are brought to the table hand in hand with the entire Arab world. By providing broad Arab and international public legitimacy for just compromises on Jerusalem and the refugees, as well as on borders and security, the regional approach eases the way towards Palestinian popular acceptance of the deal. Contrary to those skeptics who see only guile in Hamas' offers of a long-term truce with Israel, ignoring the larger political context in which the movement operates, Hamas will feel enormous Palestinian public pressure to end terrorism against Israel, and to play its part in a Palestinian government that will sign on.
2. By the same token, the U.S. role in the new constellation helps compensate for the endemic weakness in the Israeli political system which has prevented shaky Israeli coalition governments from credibly offering a viable Palestinian-Israeli bargain. Former prime minister Ehud Barak's government was already a minority coalition by the time he went to Camp David in 2000, and when he dispatched negotiators to Taba in early 2001. Ehud Olmert, Tzipi Livni and their Kadima party were on their way out the door when they renewed final status talks with the Palestinians this past year under the Annapolis umbrella, in the shadow of a Pyrrhic victory in Lebanon and corruption allegations against the prime minister.
3. Instead, the U.S., the Quartet, and the Arab League may ask Israeli and Palestinian leaders to present to their publics a complete outline for peace incorporating already ongoing Arab concessions and concrete steps to build Israeli confidence, paired with unfolding Israeli concessions and concrete steps to build Palestinian trust. Israeli and Palestinian plebiscites will take place with a full understanding on both sides that pushback from either Israeli or Palestinian governments will be met with the firm hand of their American and Arab patrons, who will be loath to see their monumental efforts fail. Israelis and Palestinians are bound to demand that their governments seize the opportunity for a breakthrough.

The Arab League, the U.S. and NATO will oversee the implementation of all aspects of the regional peace treaty: U.S.-led and Arab multinational peacekeeping forces will guarantee Palestinian and Israeli security in the West Bank and Gaza as Israel removes most settlers and phases out military control. An international trusteeship will guide the economic and institutional baby steps of the newly de-occupied demilitarized Palestinian state.

4. The U.S. will help broker Israel's peace talks with Syria – and possibly Lebanon, if Iran and Hizballah can be co-opted. Should Iran and Hizballah prove unwilling, they will find themselves isolated in a new Middle East order, facing a far more united Israeli-American-Sunni Arab and international front.

Obama will no longer tolerate the slogans of American or Israeli obstructionists who claim that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not "ripe" for resolution – it never is by their lights – or that there is no Palestinian partner for peace. Nor will he countenance an Israeli strike on Iran, as he will make clear to Netanyahu. But Obama refuses to accept the status quo, which has proven far too dangerous for the U.S., Israel and our Arab allies. The risks of rejectionism now dramatically outweigh the risks of peace.

Gidon D. Remba is executive director of the Jewish Alliance for Change (www.Jews4Change.com), a nonprofit organization which supported Barack Obama's presidential candidacy and advocates for a progressive domestic and foreign policy agenda. A veteran Middle East analyst and pro-Israel peace advocate, he served as senior foreign press editor and translator in Israel's Prime Minister's Office from 1977-1978 during the Egyptian-Israeli Camp David peace process.