

Neither The US Nor Israel Is A “Genuine Party To Peace.”

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Barack Obama is recognized to be a person of acute intelligence, a legal scholar, careful with his choice of words. He deserves to be taken seriously – both what he says, and what he omits. Particularly significant is his first substantive statement on foreign affairs, on January 22, at the State Department, when introducing George Mitchell to serve as his special envoy for Middle East peace.

Mitchell is to focus his attention on the Israel-Palestine problem, in the wake of the recent US-Israeli invasion of Gaza. During the murderous assault, Obama remained silent apart from a few platitudes, because, he said, there is only one president – a fact that did not silence him on many other issues. His campaign did, however, repeat his statement that “if missiles were falling where my two daughters sleep, I would do everything in order to stop that.” He was referring to Israeli children, not the hundreds of Palestinian children being butchered by US arms, about whom he could not speak, because there was only one president.

On January 22, however, the one president was Barack Obama, so he could speak freely about these matters – avoiding, however, the attack on Gaza, which had, conveniently, been called off just before the inauguration.

Obama’s talk emphasized his commitment to a peaceful settlement. He left its contours vague, apart from one specific proposal: “the Arab peace initiative,” Obama said, “contains constructive elements that could help advance these efforts. Now is the time for Arab states to act on the initiative’s promise by supporting the Palestinian government under President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad, taking steps towards normalizing relations with Israel, and by standing up to extremism that threatens us all.”

Obama is not directly falsifying the Arab League proposal, but the carefully framed deceit is instructive.

The Arab League peace proposal does indeed call for normalization of relations with Israel – in the context – repeat, in the context of a two-state settlement in terms of the longstanding international consensus, which the US and Israel have blocked for over 30 years, in international isolation, and still do. The core of the Arab League proposal, as Obama and his Mideast advisers know very well, is its call for a peaceful political settlement in these terms, which are well-known, and recognized to be the only basis for the peaceful settlement to which Obama professes to be committed. The omission of that crucial fact can hardly be accidental, and signals clearly that Obama envisions no departure from US rejectionism. His

call for the Arab states to act on a corollary to their proposal, while the US ignores even the existence of its central content, which is the precondition for the corollary, surpasses cynicism.

The most significant acts to undermine a peaceful settlement are the daily US-backed actions in the occupied territories, all recognized to be criminal: taking over valuable land and resources and constructing what the leading architect of the plan, Ariel Sharon, called “Bantustans” for Palestinians – an unfair comparison because the Bantustans were far more viable than the fragments left to Palestinians under Sharon’s conception, now being realized. But the US and Israel even continue to oppose a political settlement in words, most recently in December 2008, when the US and Israel (and a few Pacific islands) voted against a UN resolution supporting “the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination” (passed 173 to 5, US-Israel opposed, with evasive pretexts).

Obama had not one word to say about the settlement and infrastructure developments in the West Bank, and the complex measures to control Palestinian existence, designed to undermine the prospects for a peaceful two-state settlement. His silence is a grim refutation of his oratorical flourishes about how “I will sustain an active commitment to seek two states living side by side in peace and security.”

Also unmentioned is Israel’s use of US arms in Gaza, in violation not only of international but also US law. Or Washington’s shipment of new arms to Israel right at the peak of the US-Israeli attack, surely not unknown to Obama’s Middle East advisers.

Obama was firm, however, that smuggling of arms to Gaza must be stopped. He endorses the agreement of Condoleeza Rice and Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni that the Egyptian-Gaza border must be closed – a remarkable exercise of imperial arrogance, as the Financial Times observed: “as they stood in Washington congratulating each other, both officials seemed oblivious to the fact that they were making a deal about an illegal trade on someone else’s border – Egypt in this case. The next day, an Egyptian official described the memorandum as ‘fictional’.” Egypt’s objections were ignored.

Returning to Obama’s reference to the “constructive” Arab League proposal, as the wording indicates, Obama persists in restricting support to the defeated party in the January 2006 election, the only free election in the Arab world, to which the US and Israel reacted, instantly and overtly, by severely punishing Palestinians for opposing the will of the masters. A minor technicality is that Abbas’s term ran out on January 9, and that Fayyad was appointed without confirmation by the Palestinian parliament (many of them kidnapped and in Israeli prisons). Ha’aretz describes Fayyad as “a strange bird in Palestinian politics. On the one hand, he is the Palestinian politician most esteemed by Israel and the West. However, on the other hand, he has no electoral power whatsoever in Gaza or the West Bank.” The report also notes Fayyad’s “close relationship with the Israeli establishment,” notably his friendship with Sharon’s extremist adviser Dov Weiglass. Though lacking popular support, he is regarded as competent and honest, not the norm in the US-backed political sectors.

Obama’s insistence that only Abbas and Fayyad exist conforms to the consistent Western contempt for democracy unless it is under control.

Obama provided the usual reasons for ignoring the elected government led by Hamas. “To be a genuine party to peace,” Obama declared, “the quartet [US, EU, Russia, UN] has made

it clear that Hamas must meet clear conditions: recognize Israel's right to exist; renounce violence; and abide by past agreements." Unmentioned, also as usual, is the inconvenient fact that the US and Israel firmly reject all three conditions. In international isolation, they bar a two-state settlement including a Palestinian state; they of course do not renounce violence; and they reject the quartet's central proposal, the "road map." Israel formally accepted it, but with 14 reservations that effectively eliminate its contents (tacitly backed by the US). It is the great merit of Jimmy Carter's *Palestine: Peace not Apartheid*, to have brought these facts to public attention for the first time – and in the mainstream, the only time.

It follows, by elementary reasoning, that neither the US nor Israel is a "genuine party to peace." But that cannot be. It is not even a phrase in the English language.

It is perhaps unfair to criticize Obama for this further exercise of cynicism, because it is close to universal, unlike his scrupulous evisceration of the core component of the Arab League proposal, which is his own novel contribution.

Also near universal are the standard references to Hamas: a terrorist organization, dedicated to the destruction of Israel (or maybe all Jews). Omitted are the inconvenient facts that the US-Israel are not only dedicated to the destruction of any viable Palestinian state, but are steadily implementing those policies. Or that unlike the two rejectionist states, Hamas has called for a two-state settlement in terms of the international consensus: publicly, repeatedly, explicitly.

Obama began his remarks by saying: "Let me be clear: America is committed to Israel's security. And we will always support Israel's right to defend itself against legitimate threats."

There was nothing about the right of Palestinians to defend themselves against far more extreme threats, such as those occurring daily, with US support, in the occupied territories. But that again is the norm.

Also normal is the enunciation of the principle that Israel has the right to defend itself. That is correct, but vacuous: so does everyone. But in the context the cliché is worse than vacuous: it is more cynical deceit.

The issue is not whether Israel has the right to defend itself, like everyone else, but whether it has the right to do so by force. No one, including Obama, believes that states enjoy a general right to defend themselves by force: it is first necessary to demonstrate that there are no peaceful alternatives that can be tried. In this case, there surely are.

A narrow alternative would be for Israel to abide by a cease-fire, for example, the cease-fire proposed by Hamas political leader Khaled Mishal a few days before Israel launched its attack on December 27. Mishal called for restoring the 2005 agreement. That agreement called for an end to violence and uninterrupted opening of the borders, along with an Israeli guarantee that goods and people could move freely between the two parts of occupied Palestine, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The agreement was rejected by the US and Israel a few months later, after the free election of January 2006 turned out "the wrong way." There are many other highly relevant cases.

The broader and more significant alternative would be for the US and Israel to abandon their

extreme rejectionism, and join the rest of the world – including the Arab states and Hamas – in supporting a two-state settlement in accord with the international consensus. It should be noted that in the past 30 years there has been one departure from US-Israeli rejectionism: the negotiations at Taba in January 2001, which appeared to be close to a peaceful resolution when Israel prematurely called them off. It would not, then, be outlandish for Obama to agree to join the world, even within the framework of US policy, if he were interested in doing so.

In short, Obama's forceful reiteration of Israel's right to defend itself is another exercise of cynical deceit – though, it must be admitted, not unique to him, but virtually universal.

The deceit is particularly striking in this case because the occasion was the appointment of Mitchell as special envoy. Mitchell's primary achievement was his leading role in the peaceful settlement in northern Ireland. It called for an end to IRA terror and British violence. Implicit is the recognition that while Britain had the right to defend itself from terror, it had no right to do so by force, because there was a peaceful alternative: recognition of the legitimate grievances of the Irish Catholic community that were the roots of IRA terror. When Britain adopted that sensible course, the terror ended. The implications for Mitchell's mission with regard to Israel-Palestine are so obvious that they need not be spelled out. And omission of them is, again, a striking indication of the commitment of the Obama administration to traditional US rejectionism and opposition to peace, except on its extremist terms.

Obama also praised Jordan for its “constructive role in training Palestinian security forces and nurturing its relations with Israel” – which contrasts strikingly with US-Israeli refusal to deal with the freely elected government of Palestine, while savagely punishing Palestinians for electing it with pretexts which, as noted, do not withstand a moment's scrutiny. It is true that Jordan joined the US in arming and training Palestinian security forces, so that they could violently suppress any manifestation of support for the miserable victims of US-Israeli assault in Gaza, also arresting supporters of Hamas and the prominent journalist Khaled Amayreh, while organizing their own demonstrations in support of Abbas and Fatah, in which most participants “were civil servants and school children who were instructed by the PA to attend the rally,” according to the Jerusalem Post. Our kind of democracy.

Obama made one further substantive comment: “As part of a lasting cease-fire, Gaza's border crossings should be open to allow the flow of aid and commerce, with an appropriate monitoring regime...” He did not, of course, mention that the US-Israel had rejected much the same agreement after the January 2006 election, and that Israel had never observed similar subsequent agreements on borders.

Also missing is any reaction to Israel's announcement that it rejected the cease-fire agreement, so that the prospects for it to be “lasting” are not auspicious. As reported at once in the press, “Israeli Cabinet Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, who takes part in security deliberations, told Army Radio on Thursday that Israel wouldn't let border crossings with Gaza reopen without a deal to free [Gilad] Shalit” (AP, Jan 22); “Israel to keep Gaza crossings closed...An official said the government planned to use the issue to bargain for the release of Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier held by the Islamist group since 2006 (Financial Times, Jan. 23); “Earlier this week, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said that progress on Corporal Shalit's release would be a precondition to opening up the border crossings that have been mostly closed since Hamas wrested control of Gaza from the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority in 2007” (Christian Science Monitor, Jan. 23); “an Israeli official said there would

be tough conditions for any lifting of the blockade, which he linked with the release of Gilad Shalit" (FT, Jan. 23); among many others.

Shalit's capture is a prominent issue in the West, another indication of Hamas's criminality. Whatever one thinks about it, it is uncontroversial that capture of a soldier of an attacking army is far less of a crime than kidnapping of civilians, exactly what Israeli forces did the day before the capture of Shalit, invading Gaza city and kidnapping two brothers, then spiriting them across the border where they disappeared into Israel's prison complex. Unlike the much lesser case of Shalit, that crime was virtually unreported and has been forgotten, along with Israel's regular practice for decades of kidnapping civilians in Lebanon and on the high seas and dispatching them to Israeli prisons, often held for many years as hostages. But the capture of Shalit bars a cease-fire.

Obama's State Department talk about the Middle East continued with "the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan... the central front in our enduring struggle against terrorism and extremism." A few hours later, US planes attacked a remote village in Afghanistan, intending to kill a Taliban commander. "Village elders, though, told provincial officials there were no Taliban in the area, which they described as a hamlet populated mainly by shepherds. Women and children were among the 22 dead, they said, according to Hamididan Abdul Rahmzai, the head of the provincial council" (LA Times, Jan. 24).

Afghan president Karzai's first message to Obama after he was elected in November was a plea to end the bombing of Afghan civilians, reiterated a few hours before Obama was sworn in. This was considered as significant as Karzai's call for a timetable for departure of US and other foreign forces. The rich and powerful have their "responsibilities." Among them, the New York Times reported, is to "provide security" in southern Afghanistan, where "the insurgency is homegrown and self-sustaining." All familiar. From Pravda in the 1980s, for example.

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