

Obama Joins the Club

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The exit of Bush from the White House is already anticipated in the Arab region with sighs of relief. But what is ahead under the next US president; more of the same, regardless of who wins, or change?

True, Obama has promised some degree of withdrawal from Iraq and a level of communication with Iran. But even these promises are ambiguous and can be easily modified to fit political interests and lobby pressures at any time. Any military redeployment in Iraq would, now we are told, be matched with greater military build up in Afghanistan, a sign that the militant mentality that motivated the war hawks in the Bush administration is yet to change; the valuable lesson that bombs don't bring peace, yet to be heeded.

Even talking to Iran is an indistinct promise. To begin with, various officials in the Bush administration have already been talking to Iran — in less touted meetings, but they have engaged Tehran nonetheless — in matters most pertinent to US, not Israeli, interests (i.e. the Iraq war). Moreover, in what was widely seen as “a shift of policy”, senior US diplomat William Burns joined envoys from China, Russia, France, Britain, Germany and the EU in their talks with Tehran in Geneva 19 July. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad praised US participation and the “respect” the US envoy had shown during the meeting.

Obama's statements to assure Israel on his proposed talk with Iran are most alarming. He has tirelessly repeated that the “military option” remains on the table to ensure Israel's security. Isn't this the exact same policy trademark infused during the Bush administration, which eventually led to the war on Iraq? The US will exhaust every diplomatic channel, but the “military option” remains on the table. This was the gist of the message repeated by the warmongers of the White House through Bush's two terms. Does one need any proof of why such an attitude is not reflective of well-intentioned diplomacy?

What is equally dangerous in Obama's uttering is that he might be, and is already, feeling pressured to balance his seemingly soft attitude towards Iraq and Iran by exaggerating his country's pro-Israel stance in a way that will derail any possibility for a peaceful solution to the Palestinian- Israeli conflict, at least during his term. In fact, ominous signs of that pressure, and his succumbing to it are ample, the last of which was his statement, prior to his visit, that Jerusalem must remain undivided, a position that negates international law and the consistent tradition of various US administrations, including Bush's.

One need not repeat what Obama has said during his visit to Israel, for such rhetoric is becoming most predictable. His “commitment” to Israel and to the ever “special relationship” that unites both nations were generously invoked. Obama promised to do his utmost to keep Israel secure and to stop Iran from obtaining the atomic bomb. As for the

Palestinians, he seems keenly interested in engaging their non-democratic forces and shuns those who dare to challenge his country's biased official line that has contributed in myriad ways to the ongoing conflict.

Obama insists on disregarding the US official blind spot that has continued to destabilise the Middle East for generations. If he is indeed interested in straightening the distorted course of his country's foreign policy in this region, then he is certainly viewing it from an Israeli looking glass, the same as that used by the Bush neoconservative clique that led America into an unrivalled downfall in Mesopotamia.

But Obama is not alone. If he wins the presidential race he will join a growing club of Western leaders who refuse to heed to common sense and who behave erratically, even against the wishes of their own people.

Starting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit to Israel last March, to French President Nicolas Sarkozy's in June, to British Prime Minister Gordon Brown's in July, no one has failed to deviate from the predictable mantra: Israel first and foremost. True, some like Sarkozy dared voice some criticism of Israel's settlement policy in Jerusalem — one that Obama cannot dare repeat, even in private — but the underpinnings are the same: Israel, a country of a few million, remains the primary concern of the West in a region of hundreds of millions. Those leaders' brazen "commitment" to Israel, regardless of the consistently brutal policy carried out by the latter, is surely bizarre to say the least; bizarre, and in fact non-Democratic.

An international poll, conducted by WorldPublicOpinion.org examined the views of people from 18 countries, including France, the UK and the United States. The findings of the poll were released 1 July and were most telling. In 14 countries "people mostly say their government should not take sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Just three countries favour taking the Palestinian side (Egypt, Iran and Turkey) and one is divided (India). No country favours taking Israel's side, including the United States, where 71 per cent favour taking neither side." The entire hoopla about the "common cause" and "special relationship" and "promised land", and the fear mongers of the Armageddon crowd, failed to sway the views of the great majority of Americans.

Why then, doesn't the "candidate of change", Obama, listen to his people and truly change his government's destructive path regarding Palestine and Israel? Why doesn't the UK's Brown and France's Sarkozy listen to their peoples, considering that an equal percentage in both of their countries — 79 per cent — is beseeching them to do the same? These results have of course been consistent with public opinion in Western countries for years. It might behove these leaders to respect the canons of democracy in their own countries before lecturing others.

Following his Israel trip, Obama kick-started a European tour that took him to Germany, France and the UK. The moods were described as "cheerful" and the expectations as "high" everywhere the senator went, including Israel. As for the Palestinians, it's more of the same for them: the same arrogant demands, same unfair policies, and ever-historic bias.

In the southern Israeli town of Siderot, widely grinning Obama receive a t-shirt that read, "Siderot loves Obama". Obama, of course, didn't visit the Gaza concentration camp to find out what Palestinians there thought of him, considering his ardent defence of Israel's brutal policies against the Strip in recent years. One can only imagine what a Gazan t-shirt for

Obama might have read.

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