

Obama's New Middle East Policy: Israel's Right to "Defend Itself"

Did Obama set-up Mitchell to fail in the Middle East?

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In naming George Mitchell as special envoy to the Middle East, President Obama unfortunately made statements indicating no departure from the failing policies of previous administrations. In particular Obama emphasized Israel's right to "defend itself", never once mentioned things like the occupation or International law, attacked Hamas (a duly elected movement that represents a significant portion of the Palestinian people), supported the strangulation of Gaza, demanded no resistance from an occupied people, and supported the Israeli occupiers in their violence that most recently killed over 400 children. This logic has been tried before including under the "aggressive diplomacy" of Bill Clinton and has yielded only a strengthening of Hamas, weakening of Fatah, continued Israeli colonization on Palestinian lands, and setting the stage for future conflicts. Further, such approach is even more untenable now after the setback of the June 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon and the current war on Gaza.

As articulated well by President Jimmy Carter, it is wrong to frame this conflict simply as "democratic Israel" facing "terrorist groups like Hamas" and it is wrong to continue to fund Israeli wars while claiming to be an "honest broker." It is analogous to describing the struggles in South Africa in the 1980s as "democratic South Africa" facing off against "terrorist groups like the ANC" (actually that was President Reagan's framing in his first term in office as he supported Apartheid). Yes, some members of the ANC did use terror (including "necklacing" or burning their rivals alive) but that was miniscule compared to the state terrorism and apartheid they faced. The US cannot be an honest broker so long as the US government continues to:

- a) Give billions in military aid to Israel that is used to commit war crimes and crimes against humanity (see human rights reports on the recent Gaza aggression including use of White Phosphorus and DIME weapons).
- b) Use its veto power and diplomatic muscle to shield Israel from International Law and Human Rights obligations
- c) Demand that Hamas accepts Israel's right to exist, renounce violence, and abide by previous agreements (that they did not sign) while they US refuses to demand the same from Israel. Why not insist that Israel recognize Palestine's right to exist (or at least Palestinian right to true independence on the land that Israel has been stealing since 1947 partition resolution). Why not ask Israel to renounce violence and why not demand it abide by the signed agreements (e.g. freezing settlement activities, opening borders, allowing

freedom of movement etc.).

Both Palestinians and Israelis have work to do but one cannot equate the nuclear armed 4th strongest army in the world with a dispossessed and occupied people (2/3rds of the 10 million Palestinians in the world are refugees or displaced people). It is ironic that Mr. Obama talks about Israel's need for security when in three weeks 1300 Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces (most of them civilians, over 400 children) while in the same period 13 Israelis (10 of whom soldiers) were killed by Hamas! It is more ironic that Israeli Prime Minister Olmert interrupted President Bush while the latter is giving a lecture and instructed him to stop Condoleeza Rice from going along with the UN resolution (per Olmert testimony) when Bush continued to read a story to schoolchildren when told that America was under attack on 9/11!

If we truly want to advance peace in this area to promote US national interest, President Obama and Secretary Clinton would do well to stop parroting Bush, shift US policy to neutrality instead of always taking the side of Israel, and simply instruct Mitchell to insist that all people and countries comply with International law and human rights. This would mean ending the Israeli occupation that started in 1967 and respecting basic human rights like the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and lands. We can even start simpler by immediately endorsing the 2002 Arab peace initiative (it won't be on the table for too long), accept and deal with a unity Palestinian government (which must include Hamas and Fatah), and engage in serious negotiations based on International law. With Obama's popularity and people's interest in real change, it is even more doable than when President Eisenhower called the Israeli Prime Minister and successfully demanded that Israel withdraw its occupation forces from the Sinai and the Gaza Strip in 1956. Obama has the power to reclaim that legacy of US independence and leadership and truly change the future of the Middle East. Otherwise, it might be better if George Mitchell not waste any taxpayer money trying the same failed and biased approaches that threaten US national interests in that vital part of the world.

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