

Progress is doomed if Obama is merely a cleverer version of Bush

Binyamin Netanyahu can comfort himself with one thought as he heads to Washington

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Global Research, May 18, 2009

guardian.co.uk 12 May 2009

Region: [USA](#)

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Binyamin Netanyahu can comfort himself with one thought as he heads to Washington next week. At least when he stands alongside a popular US president who radically disagrees with him on the future of the Middle East, it will not be the first time. Netanyahu will be able to draw on the memory of a similarly tense encounter back in 1996 – the day, shortly after his election victory, when he had to make nice with a visibly chilly Bill Clinton, who had all but campaigned for Bibi’s opponent.

So presidential froideur is no novelty for the new-old Israeli prime minister. He is used to dealing with Democrats who would much prefer not to be dealing with him. He knows his job is to ignore all that and make next Monday’s meeting work. There is nothing that matters to Israeli leaders more than their relationship with Washington. Screw it up and they can end up out of a job (as Bibi’s mentor, Yitzhak Shamir, found out the hard way when he clashed with the first George Bush). People often like to criticise Israel as a law unto itself. But the reality is there’s one voice that Israel listens to intently: the one located at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. London doesn’t carry quite the same weight, as David Miliband might discover today when he meets Israel’s new hardline foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman.

So the stakes could not be higher for the first Netanyahu-Obama summit. At last we should learn exactly how the Likud leader plans to manage the Israel-Palestine conflict – and, more important, we should discover the same about Barack Obama.

There has been plenty of hyperventilating talk of a “showdown” in DC. That is unlikely. Neither side needs that right now; and Netanyahu is skilled enough a PR man to make sure things look good. Journalists will do their best to prise the words “two-state solution” from Bibi’s lips, given that he has still not committed to it. He will certainly win big headlines if he utters the magic formula, but he’s a canny enough operator to wriggle out of the question.

Still, even if the leaders do their best to conceal it, there can be no denying that Israel and the US stand further apart now than at any time in the last eight years. For those of us who believe that George Bush was a disaster for Israeli-Palestinian peace, any break from that era counts as good news.

Witness the speech that Joe Biden, the vice-president, gave to the pro-Israel lobby Aipac last week. “You’re not going to like my saying this,” he began, demanding that Israel work for a two-state solution and build no “more settlements, dismantle existing outposts, and allow the Palestinians freedom of movement”. Nor would Biden be content with mere promises.

“This is a ‘show me’ deal – not based on faith – show me ...”

Or take the leaked word of the national security adviser, James Jones, promising that the new administration would be “forceful” with Israel. Note too the Israeli angst that Obama will next month deliver a speech detailing his vision for the Middle East not in Jerusalem but in Cairo – with no promise to visit Israel either before or afterwards. It may not sound like much, but the Israeli high command had grown used to different treatment: in the Bush years, they were consulted constantly. Now they are getting a very different message.

“The attention we’re giving Middle East peace is a change,” one senior administration official told me yesterday, recalling Bush’s 2001 decision to put the entire issue on ice. “Holding both sides equally to account is a change,” he adds. Above all, Obama rightly believes that true backing for Israel does not consist in repeated declarations of support. “Part of helping Israel is solving this goddamn problem,” says that official, referring to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

All that is encouragingly un-Bush. But some in Israel suggest these actions are mere variations in the mood music, confident that the underlying US position will not shift. They draw comfort from that. The rest of us should be alarmed.

This conflict will not be solved by simply implementing the old Bush approach with more skill. Obama mustn’t be Obama on the outside and Bush on the inside. The approach itself has to change and change radically.

Start with the Bush assumption that peace could be made with the Fatah-ruled West Bank alone, shutting out Gaza and Hamas as if they didn’t exist. That approach is surely doomed: peace has to be made with the entire Palestinian people, not just one half of it. The previous US administration actively enforced the Hamas-Fatah split, favouring the latter over the former and refusing to accept a Palestinian unity government. The Obama administration has to avoid that trap.

The Bush team paid no heed to the landmark Arab Peace Initiative, under which the entire Arab world offered normalised relations with Israel in return for a withdrawal to the 1967 lines. Obama’s Middle East envoy, George Mitchell, has by contrast hailed the plan; Jordan’s King Abdullah said this week it would form the heart of Obama’s vision.

The great merit of this approach is that it would shrink down the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, letting it be dwarfed by the prize of a larger regional peace. Israel could even settle with Hamas, which would be merely one of 57 Arab or Muslim states reconciling with Israel. What’s more, it would represent a welcome break from the never-ending, futile bilateral talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority that constituted Bush’s failed Annapolis process.

But there is a danger. The US-based analyst Daniel Levy warns that the “problem with bilateralism was not the absence of the Arab states but the absence of the United States”. The biggest change Obama could make from his predecessor is to have the US directly and energetically involved in peacemaking. That means more than chairing talks. It could even entail allaying Israeli security concerns by promising a US-led military force to watch over vacated territory: the UN force in East Timor might be a model.

Which brings us to settlements. Bush indulged them, even authorising the largest

settlement blocs. Previous US administrations had sought a settlement freeze – but allowing for “natural growth”. That simply opened up endless negotiations with Israel over the precise definition of growth, debating the status of specific housing units. It’s a dead end. Obama should simply demand an end to all settlement expansion – and refuse to get into hair-splitting argument.

Bibi will want to talk about none of this next week. He would prefer the focus to be Iran and its nuclear programme. Obama should heed those Israeli fears, which are real. But he should also insist that Israeli-Palestinian peace cannot wait on the Iranian question. The two have to be pursued at the same time. Indeed, if Obama can show on-the-ground progress on the Palestinian issue, he is more likely to win broader Arab and Muslim support to the cause of -restraining Iran.

Obama has enormous global political capital. He has a better chance than most of his predecessors at achieving the Middle East peace that eluded them – but only if he shows an iron determination to avoid their mistakes.

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