

The Promised Land? Obama, Emanuel and Israel

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In the first major appointment of his administration, President-elect Barack Obama has named as his chief of staff Congressman Rahm Emanuel, an Israeli citizen and Israeli army veteran whose father, according to the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, was a member of Menachem Begin's Irgun forces during the Nakba and named his son after "a Lehi combatant who was killed" — i.e., a member of Yitzhak Shamir's terrorist Stern Gang, responsible for, in addition to other atrocities against Palestinians, the more famous bombing of the King David Hotel and assassination of the UN peace envoy Count Folke Bernadotte.

In rapid response to this news, the editorial in the next day's Arab News (Jeddah) was entitled "Don't pin much hope on Obama — Emanuel is his chief of staff and that sends a message". This editorial referred to the Irgun as a "terror organization" (a judgment call) and concluded: "Far from challenging Israel, the new team may turn out to be as pro-Israel as the one it is replacing."

That was always likely. Obama repeatedly pledged unconditional allegiance to Israel during his campaign, most memorably in an address to the AIPAC national convention which Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery characterized as "a speech that broke all records for obsequiousness and fawning", and America's electing a black president has always been more easily imagined than any American president's declaring his country's independence from Israeli domination.

Still, one of the greatest advantages for the United States in electing Barack Hussein Obama was the prospect that the world's billion-plus Muslims, who now view the United States with almost universal loathing and hatred, would be dazzled by the new president's eloquence, life story, skin color and middle name, would think again with open minds and would give America a chance to redeem itself in their eyes and hearts — not incidentally, drastically shortening the long lines of aspiring jihadis eager to sacrifice their lives while striking a blow against the evil empire.

The profound loathing and hatred of the Muslim world toward the United States, which has always had its roots for America's unconditional support for the injustices inflicted and still being inflicted on the Palestinians, can fairly be considered the core of the primary foreign policy and "national security" problems confronting the United States in recent years. Why would Obama, a man of unquested brilliance, have chosen to send such a contemptuous message to the Muslim world with his first major appointment? Why would he wish to disabuse the Muslim world of its hopes (however modest) and slap it across the face at the earliest opportunity?

A further contemptuous message is widely rumored to be forthcoming — the naming as “Special Envoy for Middle East Peace” of Dennis Ross, the notorious Israel-Firster who, throughout the 12 years of the Bush the First and Clinton administrations, ensured that American policy toward the Palestinians did not deviate one millimeter from Israeli policy and that no progress toward peace could be made and who has since headed the AIPAC spin-off “think tank”, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Nevertheless, since it is almost always constructive to seek a silver lining in the darkest clouds, a silver lining can be found and cited. For decades, the Palestinian leadership has been “waiting for Godot” — waiting for the U.S. Government to finally do the right thing (if only in its own obvious self-interest) and to force Israel to comply with international law and UN Resolutions and permit them to have a decent mini-state on a tiny portion of the land that once was theirs.

This was never a realistic hope. It has not happened, and it will never happen. So it may well be salutary not to waste eight more days (let alone eight more years) playing along and playing the fool while more Palestinian lands are confiscated and more Jewish colonies and Jews-only bypass roads are built on them, clinging to the delusion that the charming Mr. Obama, admirable though he may be in so many other respects, will eventually (if only in a second term, when he no longer has to worry about reelection) see the light and do the right thing. It is long overdue for the Palestinians themselves to seize the initiative, to reset the agenda and to declare a new “only game in town”.

Furthermore, in February, Israel will elect a new Knesset. Bibi Netanyahu, who, most polls and coalition-building calculations suggest, is most likely to emerge as the next prime minister, has one (if only one) great virtue. He is absolutely honest in not professing any desire (however insincere) to see the creation of any Palestinian “state” (whether decent or less-than-a-Bantustan in nature) or to engage in any talks (even never-ending and fraudulent ones) ostensibly about that possibility. His return to power would definitively slam the door on the illusion of a “two-state solution” somewhere over an ever-receding horizon.

This would constitute a blessing and a liberation for Palestinian minds and Palestinian aspirations. Their leadership(s) could then return, after a long, costly and painful diversion, to fundamental principles, to pursuing the goal of a democratic, nonracist and nonsectarian state in all of Israel/Palestine with equal rights for all who live there.

This just goal could and should be pursued by strictly nonviolent means. If the goal is to convince a determined and powerful settler-colonial movement which wishes to seize your land, settle it and keep it (eventually cleansing it of you and your fellow natives) that it should cease, desist and leave, nonviolent forms of resistance are suicidal. If, however, the goal were to be to obtain the full rights of citizenship in a democratic, nonracist state (as was the case in the American civil rights movement and the South African anti-apartheid movement), then nonviolence would be the only viable approach. Violence would be totally inappropriate and counterproductive. The morally impeccable approach would also be the tactically effective approach. The high road would be the only road.

No American president — least of all Barack Obama — could easily support racism and apartheid and oppose democracy and equal rights, particularly if democracy and equal rights were being pursued by nonviolent means. No one anywhere could easily do so. The writing would be on the wall, and the clock would be running out on the tired game of using

a perpetual “peace process” as an excuse to delay decisions (while building more “facts on the ground”) forever.

Democracy and equal rights would not come quickly or easily. Forty years passed between when, on the night before his assassination, Dr. Martin Luther King cried out that he had been to the mountain top and had seen the promised land and when Barack Obama was elected as president of the United States. (The Bible suggests a similar waiting period in the wilderness for Moses.) Forty-six years passed between the installation of a formal apartheid regime in South Africa and the election of Nelson Mandela as president of a fully democratic and nonracist “rainbow nation”.

While it may be hoped that the transformation would be significantly quicker in Israel/Palestine, it is clear that many who already qualify as “senior citizens” will not live to see the promised land. However, if the promised land of a democratic state with equal rights for all is correctly and clearly perceived and persistently and peacefully pursued, there is ample reason for confidence that Israel/Palestine will one day experience the tearful exaltation of a “Mandela Moment” or an “Obama Moment”, restoring hope in the moral potential both of a nation and of mankind, and that the Jews, Muslims and Christians who live there will finally reach their promised land.

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