

Obama and Palestine: Predictable Disappointment

Christopher Vasilopoulos, PhD



As an early and enthusiastic Obama supporter and a professor of international relations who teaches Middle East politics and American foreign policy, I have been often asked in class and in public forums, ‘what do you think Obama will do regarding Palestine?’ My answers came down to that there was likely to be a dramatic improvement in the tone of American-Arab relations and with the Muslim world in general, but only within the limits of a continuing stalemate in Palestine. This prediction has turned out to be all too true, as welcome as better general relations are. I am more pessimistic now, nine months into the Obama administration. I would say now that even when or if the domestic agenda calms down, if some form of health care gets passed, the economy recovers, and the withdrawal of troops in Iraq takes place as planned, there will be no substantive improvement in the plight of the Palestinians. Israel will continue its policy of changing the facts on the ground, each day making concessions on settlements, Jerusalem, the wall and a multitude of other anti-Palestinian activities all the more difficult.

I have two reasons for this view, one direct, one indirect. Although far from Palestine, the war in Afghanistan is now Obama’s War. This increasingly evident futile effort—to do what?—eliminate al Qaeda? bring democracy to the country? secure Pakistan? The list grows with each headline. I realize the pledge to root out terrorist bases

was largely a promise driven by the campaign. Democrats are eager to show they are as murderous as Republicans on any issue related to national security, especially during an election campaign. Obama, however, seems sincerely committed to his policy. 'The right war, the right time. It is not a war of choice but of necessity.' So goes the rhetoric. What president ever says a war he supports is the wrong war fought at the wrong time and is not necessary? And of course the war in Afghanistan remains a politically cheap way to establish Obama's national security credentials. How many Americans object to the killing of Muslims, so long as any connection, however tenuous, can be made with terrorism, however ill-defined? Given the interconnectedness of political issues, Obama cannot afford to lose any domestic support. Muslims will thus continue to provide the pound of flesh demanded by the Shylocks of national security.

Although I more or less anticipated these dreary developments, I retained my hope for Obama's Palestinian policy. Perhaps, I reasoned, by demonstrating 'strength and resolve' in Afghanistan, he would buy some leeway in Palestine? Always a slender hope, this thread now seems severed. Despite the appointment of George Mitchell, the foreign policy elite which has dominated Palestinian issues for decades remains intact. Apart from some rhetorical flourishes, almost immediately recanted or 'put into the context of our undying commitment to our greatest ally, Israel,' nothing has changed. Settlements expand, despite their manifest illegality and official condemnation by the UN, the US included sort of. The Wall continues to lengthen, creating more misery for Palestinians. The military incursions continue at the slightest excuse, killing and maiming civilians, including women and children.

I realize that Obama is much more skeptical than Bush-Cheney of Israel's ultra nationalist religious right. But how much difference will this make since the only viable opposition is also a right-wing party with a Palestinian platform virtually indistinguishable from the current extremist government that has avowed anti-Palestinian racists, like Lieberman, in the cabinet? Let me suggest why I believe the Obama administration is not committed to substantive change in America's policy toward Israel, which is to say America's virtual absorption of the Israel point of view in Palestine and the entire Middle East. Again, we must make an inference, since it is foolish to go by US rhetoric in this region. For any positive change to take place in Palestine, if America is to be taken seriously as an 'honest broker' in the region, still the official policy, despite being thoroughly discredited, I believe it is imperative for Obama to discuss the danger of *Israeli* nuclear weapons.

My principal reason for pessimism is that every time Obama or Clinton refers to the unacceptability of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, they refer to non-existent Iranian weapons and ignore hundreds of Israeli nuclear warheads. The American mantra reconfirmed by Obama-Clinton is 'no nuclear weapons in the Middle East.' Who can disagree with this? Who wants nuclear weapons in the Middle East or anywhere else for that matter? The difficulty with the American mantra could not be more simple or

compelling. It is false in its premises and false in the facts. Americans have accepted nuclear weapons in the Middle East, so long as they are Israeli. And Israel has had nuclear weapons for over thirty years, hundreds of war loads and missiles capable of reaching every capital in the region. Every time an American official intones the mantra, 'nuclear weapons are unacceptable in the region' the hypocrisy bell clangs. Therefore my critical indicator of change in American policy regarding Palestine is this: would Obama say that all nuclear weapons in the Middle East are unacceptable, including the Israeli's? so far there has been a resounding silence, except for the hypocrisy bell. Clang! Clang!

Much more is at stake than political consistency and the credibility dependent upon it. There is a much greater problem entailed in the mantra than a flagrant double-standard. The very stability of the region, one of the principal objectives of American foreign policy is held hostage to this absurd mantra. So long as Israeli nuclear weapons are ignored there can be no nuclear stability in the region. As every nuclear strategist knows, it is inherently unstable for only one adversary to have nuclear weapons. Nuclear deterrence, that is, nuclear stability, requires mutually assured destruction (MAD). This doctrine holds that stability requires that each nuclear power has the ability to retaliate effectively after the most devastating attack possible. This is called 'second strike capability.' To be effective it must inflict unacceptable damage to the nation which struck first. This has been the logic of nuclear stability ever since the Soviet Union developed its ability to strike the US. Its only assumption is the belief in the sanity of those who hold the nuclear triggers. Like it or not, precarious or not, MAD has worked. There is no reason to believe its fundamental logic no longer applies. It has applied regionally as well, as the case of India and Pakistan demonstrates.

Of course, the assumption of sanity is properly called into question by religious and other fanatics. No one wants such true believers to have control of nuclear weapons. 'Aha! Therefore, we have to stop the Iranians!' The problem with this corollary of the American mantra is that it ignores Israeli fanatics, who are more firmly in control of Israel and its nuclear weapons than Islamic fundamentalists are in control of Iran and its non-existent nuclear weapons. No one doubts that Israel would use nuclear weapons on the Arabs, whether or not they have been attacked with such weapons. Everyone fears that Israel, rather than be defeated, would resort to nuclear Armageddon. Indeed this is one of the principal reasons that America does all it can to avoid an Israeli defeat. To the degree this is true, American foreign policy is held hostage to the existence of the Israeli monopoly of nuclear weapons, *a fortiori*, when Israel is controlled by right-wing fanatics as is the current case.

There are alternatives to giving in to the threat of Masada. One is of course the denial of the American mantra. This would recognize the logic of deterrence by allowing Iran to develop a second strike capability *vis a vis* Israel. Or America could provide the second strike force by guaranteeing the nuclear security of every country in the region. America has provided nuclear deterrence for Japan for sixty years. America has made it

clear that a Soviet or Russian attack on Europe would be considered an attack on the US. One can only wonder, however, if this protection applies to Muslim Turkey. If so, it has been kept very quiet. Or, thirdly, nuclear stability can be obtained by disarming Israel. Each of these options requires American acknowledgment of the existence and danger of Israel nuclear weapons.

Failure to do so condemns the region to nuclear instability, because (1) it gives Israel a free hand and (2) it gives other powers in the region an overwhelming incentive to develop their own deterrent capability. The American mantra that 'nuclear weapons are unacceptable in the Middle East' is thus far more than hypocritical. It undermines American interests in the region, chiefly oil. And it imperils the lives and property of hundreds of millions of people. As a political realist, neither of these factors would, by itself or in combination, condemn American policy, if there were a reason to run these tremendous risks. What is this reason? The survival of Israel? There are two things wrong with making Israeli survival the predominant objective of American Middle East policy. It assumes that five million Israeli Jews are more important than more than two hundred million Arabs, to say nothing of Turks and Iranians. No one even makes this argument in public, except the religious zealots of the Chosen People. Moreover, leaving human life aside, it assumes that resourceless Israel is more important than energy rich Arab lands. Can one imagine an American capitalist making such an argument? Or an American motorist? From the realist perspective, unless it can be reasonably argued that Israel helps America meet its strategic objectives in the Middle East, America's unquestioned support of Israel is absurd. One need not even get to the question of morality, the murder and oppression of millions of Palestinians, to conclude that America's alliance with Israel comes at much too high a price.

It is important to note that this conclusion does not even broach the difficult topics surrounding a viable Palestinian state. My point is that no serious discussion of these topics can be undertaken until American policy makers acknowledge the facts of Israel's nuclear monopoly. For Israeli nuclear weapons have emboldened rightwing Israeli governments to further and deepen their oppression of the Palestinians. And Israeli nuclear weapons have intimidated American policy makers who do believe that a Palestinian state is not only just but necessary for good relations with the Arab world.

I am compelled to warn that the next time we hear Obama intone the mantra that 'nuclear weapons in the Middle East are unacceptable' we should hear more than the 'clang! clang!' of hypocrisy. We should hear the bell sounding the knell of political rationality. And what will take its place, if not the irrational forces of hatred, bigotry, racism and fanaticism?