

Obama and the Middle East

by Hussein Agha and Robert Malley¹

In dem Aufsatz warnen die beiden Autoren davor, dass Barack Obama bei Ansätzen der Regelung des israelisch-palästinensischen Konfliktes ein revolutionärer Präsident sein werde. Er und sein Team seien eher dem Pragmatismus und der Geduld im Rahmen der eigenen nationalen Interessen verpflichtet. Gleichwohl stehe zu erwarten, dass Obama genötigt sein könnte, aufgrund ergebnisloser Verhandlungen zwischen Israel und den Palästinensern in Zusammenarbeit mit einer breiten internationalen Koalition einschließlich arabischer Staaten, Russlands und Europas einen detaillierten Entwurf für den Zwei-Staaten-Vertrag vorzulegen, den die beiden Parteien im Nahen Osten schwerlich zurückweisen könnten. Alte Rezepte seien überholt. Erschwerend falle ins Gewicht, dass die Zwei-Staaten-Lösung vor allem außerhalb Palästinas lebendig sei und wie eine amerikanische oder westliche Idee daherkomme. Die Friedenskräfte auf beiden Seiten hätten lange diese Option verfochten, und je mehr sie gegenwärtig damit identifiziert würden, desto weniger attraktiv sei sie. Agha und Malley empfehlen deshalb Washington, mit der Option an die palästinensischen und israelischen Skeptiker vor Ort und in der Diaspora heranzutreten und sie davon zu überzeugen. Ferner sei es falsch, allein Machmud Abbas zu stärken, der nur einen Teil der palästinensischen Gesellschaft hinter sich habe. Deshalb müsse die US-Administration damit aufhören, einer Versöhnung zwischen „Fatah“ und „Hamas“ im Wege zu stehen. Die einseitige Unterstützung von Abbas beschädige innerpalästinensisch seine Position. Obams Start sei ein guter Anfang gewesen, schließen die Autoren, doch die Zweifel der Araber und Muslime würden gewaltig bleiben. Die wichtigste Aufgabe der Gegenwart liege darin, den Grund für eine große diplomatische Initiative zu legen, die den Skeptikern und den Gegnern Amerikas den Wind aus den Segeln nehme. Es sei nicht damit getan, die hilflose Unterscheidung zwischen Extremisten und Gemäßigten fortzusetzen und sich damit von den höchst relevanten Akteuren in der Region zu trennen.

1.

By virtually every measure – name, race, origins, and upbringing – Barack Hussein Obama was a revolutionary presidential candidate. In Mideast policy at least, there is little reason to imagine that he will be a revolutionary president. The radical break with traditional US policy came with the Bush administration, during which the US invaded and then occupied Iraq, shunned Syria, and engaged in an effort, at once ambitious and irresponsible, to reshape the region. Bush's presidency represented an upheaval because it was both guided and blinded by a rigid ideological outlook and because of its uncommon proclivity to choose military over diplomatic means. Obama's first step will be to close that stormy parenthesis. It will be no small achievement.

¹ "The New York Review of Books" Volume 56, Number 10 / June 11, 2009.

His own agenda for the Middle East is at the center of greater speculation, and at the heart of that speculation is the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There are signs – the fact that they are taking their time, reviewing their policies, consulting broadly – that the President and his team are committed to pragmatism and patience, qualities they found wanting in Bush's rash attempt to impose a new order on the Middle East but also in Bill Clinton's impetuous efforts to reach a comprehensive settlement. Their focus, at the outset at least, likely will be on improving conditions on the ground, including the West Bank economy, curbing if not halting Israeli settlement construction, pursuing reform of Palestinian security forces, and improving relations between Israel and Arab countries.

But there also are hints of a grand ambition biding its time. Obama has not staked his presidency on resolving the conflict, but he has not shied away from the challenge either. Judging by what the new president and his colleagues have suggested, attending to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a matter of US national interest. The administration seems prepared to devote considerable diplomatic, economic, and, perhaps, political capital to that end. And the goal, once the ground has been settled, will be to achieve a comprehensive, two-state solution.

At first glance, there's more reason to be confounded than convinced. If such is the President's objective, it will be pursued under unusually inauspicious circumstances. In Israel, a prime minister, Ehud Olmert, who never tired of reiterating his commitment to a Palestinian state has been replaced by one, Benjamin Netanyahu, who can barely bring himself to utter the words. His coalition partners – a mix of right-wing, xenophobic, and religious parties – make matters worse. Even the participation of Ehud Barak and his Labor party in the coalition is of scant comfort. Barak was prime minister when Israeli-Palestinian negotiations collapsed at the Camp David summit in 2000; the principal lesson he seems to have drawn is to distrust all things Palestinian. As defense minister under Olmert, he barely concealed his disdain for the talks the Palestinians conducted with his own government, dismissing them as an "academic seminar." It is hard to imagine this new coalition going further than its predecessor, which, in Palestinian eyes, didn't go far enough.

On the Palestinian side, intense Egyptian-mediated reconciliation talks between Hamas and Fatah have so far failed to stitch the national movement together. The price of their divisions, costly under any circumstances, has inflated several-fold as a result of the war in Gaza in December and January between Israel and Hamas. The conflict proved, if proof were still needed, that President Mahmoud Abbas cannot continue to talk peace with Israel when Israel is at war with Palestinians and that Palestinians cannot make peace with Israel when

they are at war with themselves. Hamas possesses the power to spoil any progress and will use it. It can act as an implacable opponent against any potential Palestinian compromise. Bilateral negotiations that failed when Olmert was prime minister and Hamas was a mere Palestinian faction are unlikely to succeed with Netanyahu at the helm and Hamas having grown into a regional reality.

If, despite this desolate landscape, the Obama administration nonetheless is determined to push for a final agreement, it could be because the President has something else in mind. At some point, he might intend to bypass negotiations between the parties and, with support from a broad international coalition including Arab countries, Russia, and the European Union, present them with a detailed two-state agreement they will be hard-pressed to reject. The concept stems from the notion that, left to their own devices, the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships are incapable of reaching an accord and that they will need all the pressure and persuasion the world can muster to take the last, fateful steps. It is one option. But before jumping toward it, basic issues should be explored. Getting the leaders to endorse a peace deal will be no mean feat, but it is not the only and perhaps not the most substantial challenge. The other question is how in the current climate the Israeli and Palestinian people would welcome a two-state solution. Would they view it as authentic or illegitimate? Would they see it as ending their conflict or merely opening its next round? Would it be more effective at mobilizing supporters or at galvanizing opponents? What, in short, would a two-state solution actually solve?

2.

The challenge of ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has, of late, almost entirely revolved around tinkering with the details of a two-state agreement. Efforts toward a settlement, whether official or unofficial, focused on adjusting percentages of territorial annexation and land exchange; dividing and defining forms of sovereignty over Jerusalem; describing the attributes of a Palestinian state; and, more often as afterthought than central concern, finding technical ways to resettle and compensate the refugees. Successive failures and the repeated inability to satisfy both Israeli and Palestinian needs have been vexing. So far at least, these difficulties have not called into question the assumption that an equilibrium of interests exists or that it can be fully found within a two-state agreement. It's just been seen as a matter of trying harder.

That President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert were incapable of reaching a settlement in 2008 following the goals set at the Annapolis conference might not be conclusive. But it gives reason to doubt the premise that more of the same can yield something different. Abbas is

widely hailed as among the Palestinians' most pragmatic leaders. Olmert took a more circuitous route to the peace camp, but he exhibited the faith of the late convert, intense and profound. After months of talks, Abbas declined a far more concessive Israeli proposal – on the size of the territory for Palestinians, for example – than the one Yasser Arafat turned down eight years ago and for which the then Palestinian leader was excoriated as an implacable enemy of peace. There is little reason to believe that more tweaking of the accord would have made a difference.

A workable two-state agreement would address a large share of the two sides' aspirations. It would preserve Israel's Jewish character and majority, provide it with final and recognized borders, and maintain its ties to Jewish holy sites. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza would live free of Israeli occupation, they would govern Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem, and refugees would have the opportunity to choose normal lives through resettlement and compensation. If meeting those goals were sufficient, why have the parties proved incapable of settling the dispute?

Aspirations reflect historical experience. For Israel's Jewish population, this includes displacement, persecution, the life of the ghetto, and the horrors of the Holocaust; and the long, frustrated quest for a normal, recognized, and accepted homeland. There is a craving for a future that will not echo the past and for the kind of ordinary security – the unquestioned acceptance of a Jewish presence in the region – that even overwhelming military superiority cannot guarantee. There is, too, at least among a significant, active segment of the Israeli population, a deep-seated attachment to the land, all of it, that constitutes Eretz Israel.

For Palestinians, the most primal demands relate to addressing and redressing a historical experience of dispossession, expulsion, dispersal, massacres, occupation, discrimination, denial of dignity, persistent killing off of their leaders, and the relentless fracturing of their national polity.

These Israeli and Palestinian yearnings are of a sort that, no matter how precisely fine-tuned, a two-state deal will find it hard to fulfill. Over the years, the goal gradually has shifted from reaching peace to achieving a two-state agreement. Those aims might sound the same, but they are not: peace may be possible without such an agreement just as such an agreement need not necessarily lead to peace. Partitioning the land can, and most probably will, be an important means of achieving a viable, lasting, peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians. But it is not the end.

3.

The idea of establishing a Palestinian state alongside Israel has an unusually interesting, troubled, and – from the British plan of the 1930s to the United Nations partition plan of 1947 – mainly foreign pedigree. What it is not and, save for a brief period in the recent past, has not been is an indigenous Palestinian demand. Partition meant accepting less than the whole of the area of the British Mandate of Palestine; it also came to mean barring the return of refugees who were expelled or fled in 1948. For most of its history, the Palestinian national movement would have nothing to do with it. Israelis were no more enthralled. It took them even longer to warm up to the concept of Palestinian statehood, which they saw as both artificial, insofar as no such entity had existed in the past, and dangerous, because most Arabs and Palestinians denied Israelis the reciprocal right to a Jewish homeland.

Palestinians came to accept the two-state solution by the late 1980s, though that acceptance was always somewhat grudging. Statehood acquired the trappings of a national cause but it never truly matched national aspirations. For most, it appealed more to the head than to the heart; it was an arguably useful way of achieving greater goals but never the objective in and of itself. Unlike Zionism, for whom statehood was the central objective, the Palestinian fight was primarily about other matters. The absence of a state was not the cause of all their misfortune. Its creation would not be the full solution either.

Palestinian embrace of the idea of statehood essentially was the handiwork of a single man. With time, cunning, and shrewd politics, and because few dared challenge his militant credentials, Yasser Arafat fundamentally altered his movement's position. His efforts were not without ambiguity. He toyed with Palestinians and worried Israelis by presenting a Palestinian state both as a solution and as a way station toward one. He made compromise – the acceptance of an Israeli state within the 1967 borders – feel like conquest and he managed to pack into partition feelings of historical vindication, dignity, and honor. When it came to persuading the West and Israel that he genuinely believed in a two-state solution, his past record of militancy was a burden. But when it came to selling a two-state solution to his people, that record was his greatest asset.

Among Palestinians, the concept of statehood has not aged well. It has suffered several punishing blows, mainly at the hands of those who purported to buttress it. This is not chiefly related to its substance, which, through a series of formal and informal Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, has not varied much and, if anything, has come closer to mirroring what the Palestinians could live with. It has everything to do with who is promoting it, for what reason,

in what way, and in what domestic and regional context. Palestinians do not judge the idea of a state on its merits. They judge it by the company it keeps.

4.

The new millennium began with the near-universal acceptance of the idea of a Palestinian state, which is precisely when its support among Palestinians began to slip. President Bush, the first US president to have ardently endorsed it, framed it as *the* answer to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and then hurriedly narrowed the challenge to the mundane task of building state institutions. Gone was the revolution-ary aura with which Arafat imbued the idea; the struggle, no longer about freedom and the end of occupation, became about erecting responsible structures of government.

One of Bush's least noticed but most profound and pernicious legacies in the region might well turn out to have been this transformation of the concept of Palestinian statehood from among the more revolutionary to the more conservative, from inspiring to humdrum. A small fraction of Palestinians, mainly members of the Palestinian Authority's elite, saw the point of building state institutions, had an interest in doing so, and went to work. For the majority, this kind of project.

Today, the idea of Palestinian statehood is alive, but mainly outside of Palestine.

Establishing a state has become a matter of utmost priority for Europeans, who see it as crucial to stabilizing the region and curbing the growth of extremism; for Americans, who hail it as a centerpiece in efforts to contain Iran as well as radical Islamists and to forge a coalition between so-called moderate Arab states and Israel; and even for a large number of Israelis who have come to believe it is the sole effective answer to the threat to Israel's existence posed by Arab demographics. Those might all be good reasons, though none is of particular relevance to Palestinians; and each only further alienates them from the vision of statehood, the purported object of their struggle.

Universal endorsement has its downside. The more the two-state solution looks like an American or Western, not to mention Israeli, interest, the less it appeals to Palestinians. It is hard to generate excitement among Palestinians for a project explicitly aimed at protecting the interests of their historic foe (Israel), defeating one of their political organizations (Hamas), or rescuing pro-Western Arab regimes for which they evince little sympathy.

Many Palestinians feel that the notion of statehood has been hijacked by their historic detractors who rejected it when it was briefly a Palestinian idea only to endorse it when they

made it their own. The process of legitimizing a state in international eyes has helped discredit it in those of its intended beneficiaries.

The two-state concept has been further tarnished by what has become of its Palestinian promoters. Today, many Palestinians no longer see their leaders as carrying out a national project but rather as instruments of foreign designs aimed at bolstering one faction of Palestinians against another. When the Palestinian Authority seeks guidance, it appears to look outward: to the US to judge whether the program of a putative national unity government would pass muster or to help devise a security plan; to Israel for assistance coping with the Islamist challenge; to Egypt and the rest of the world for how to deal with Gaza.

In all this, the PA's policy choices pose less of a problem than the method through which they seem to be reached – based not on an indigenous Palestinian notion of national self-interest, but rather on a foreign concept of what it ought to be. On their own, Palestinian leaders might opt for confrontation with Hamas, for unity, or for something else. The decision might work or it might backfire. At least it would be theirs. Instead, they currently speak and act as if they are at the head of some Palestinians – the more respectable ones – while leaving it to others to handle the more troublesome lot. All of which diminishes the PA's standing, even in the eyes of many otherwise most prone to support its program, and inflates its opposition, even among many who share nothing in common with the Islamists' agenda.

None of this was preordained. Abbas came to power in 2005 with the historic legitimacy of forty years of arduous struggle; with authority that neither Fatah nor Hamas dared to challenge; and with a then-credible vision, the two-state solution, which had long formed the core of his beliefs. These could have been put to good use to fulfill his original plan, which was to moderate Hamas's policies by gaining the cooperation of the Islamist movement and turning the Palestinian president into the necessary intermediary between Palestinians – all of them – and the international community for the achievement of a peace agreement with Israel. That was not to be.

Abbas's legitimacy was eroded by the West's suffocating embrace – a bear hug made worse for its being American, and worse yet for coming from President Bush. His authority was blunted by intrusive US meddling as Palestinians questioned whether decisions were made by their president or imposed by others. And his vision was blurred by the two-state solution's metamorphosis from a national idea to a foreign one.

Abbas's predicament stems from the help he has been denied as well as from the support he has been ill-advisedly given by those who claim to wish him well, the US and Europeans in particular. Time and again, they have pushed him in directions his instincts initially resisted but to which, bereft of a support team and the instruments of power needed to stand firm, he ultimately succumbed – away from national unity and toward greater reliance on foreign benefactors. Condescendingly justifying their actions by alleging that he was powerless, the US and the Europeans only made him appear more so. Abbas is an opportunity that has never ceased to be missed.

5.

Statehood was and could at some point again be a Palestinian achievement, but for now it has become somebody else's prize. That is not necessarily fatal. Obama has what no US president before him had and, one could venture, few following him will possess: an ability to speak to a foreign audience and, without in any way diminishing America's dignity, elevate theirs. His apparent determination to broaden Israeli-Palestinian talks so as to involve in one way or another tens of Arab and Muslim states might give American diplomacy a further, notable lift. With time and tenacity, a strategy predicated on building an international coalition, pressing the two sides to make necessary compromises, and presenting them with a final two-state solution might succeed. A state packaged by Bush is one thing. Wrapped up by Obama, it would be something else altogether.

Then again, it would be a gamble. Should a significant number of Palestinians or Israelis construe such a solution as promoted by the wrong people for the wrong reasons in the wrong way, they will not see it as a solution at all. They will object and seek to mobilize those without whose support a deal would stand on tenuous grounds. For some time at least, the benefits of a deal will be less evident than the concessions it requires. For opponents, that time will be precious. An agreement that is not implemented or that does not last would produce a radicalizing effect that no absence of agreement could ever accomplish.

There may be another way. Its starting point would be less of an immediate effort to achieve a two-state agreement or propose US ideas to that effect. Rather, it would be an attempt to transform the political atmosphere and reformulate the diplomatic process. This would entail, first, identifying and recognizing fundamental Israeli and Palestinian concerns and aspirations and then placing them at the core of the process. In turn, this would involve altering how a US-supported solution is conceived and presented to both sides so that Palestinians see it as the outcome of their national struggle and Israelis as the culmination of

their historic quest rather than as the byproduct of others' strategic pursuits. The end result might well be the same two states, living side by side. But the journey would be more authentic and its destination more acceptable.

The task, in other words, would not be to polish up answers to questions of borders, security, Jerusalem, or how to compensate refugees. That approach increasingly is becoming a sideshow, chiefly of interest to official negotiators. Nor would talk center on creating Palestinian institutions or extolling a two-state solution's value in combating extremism or reshaping the region. When Israel's foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, calls for dropping timeworn slogans – land for peace, two-state solution – he has a political purpose. He also has a point. Endless repetition has not brought realization of these goals closer, and it has chipped away at their credibility. America's discourse can reconnect with both sides' hopes and needs if it addresses them and reverts to basics – namely, acknowledging and redressing injustices suffered by Palestinians and providing Israelis with the recognition and normalcy historically denied them.

A new language would help; so too would a broader audience. Peace camps on both sides have long been sold on the two-state idea. They cannot sell it any longer. The more they are identified with the proposal, the less appealing it will be. The US should reach out to skeptical constituencies that would make a difference but are left indifferent by current talk of a two-state agreement. One example is the settlers, an active and dynamic Israeli group yet one that the outside world typically treats as modern-day lepers. A more inclusive political process could recognize their views and concerns, consider their interests, and invite them to take part in discussions.

Another such case, certainly, is the Palestinian diaspora, whose opinions have defined national aspirations from the outset and will shape the collective response into the future. Walter Russell Mead puts it well in a recent article: "Any deal," he writes, "must address the issues of greatest concern to the dispossessed refugees, who best embody Palestinian nationalism and remain the ultimate source of political legitimacy in Palestinian politics.» (Walter Russel Mead, « Change, They Can Believe In,» *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2009).

President Obama will give a speech in Cairo, though in view of the state of Arab polarization, it carries equal risk of dividing as of uniting public opinion; he also likely will make the traditional pilgrimage to Ramallah. But why not consider a speech that will make even the most cynical pause – one that addresses the Palestinian refugees' concerns, is delivered to

refugees, and given in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon? President Obama, flanked by President Abbas, surrounded by refugee leaders, speaking to a cheering crowd of thousands hailing from camps across Lebanon and, through them, to millions of Palestinians scattered across the globe: the sight, powerful and stirring, could do more than any US plan to change the mood, minds, and emotions.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict will have to be tackled within the 1967 boundaries. But it can be resolved only if it deals candidly with its 1948 genesis. In fact, the more the refugees' plight is openly acknowledged by the US, the easier it will become to end the indecent prolongation of their current misery on the dubious pretext that if their lives could be improved, this would eradicate their cause and obliterate their rights.

It will be equally important for the United States to modify its dealings with domestic Palestinian politics and, in particular, the Palestinian president. Abbas is a man in desperate need of being left alone. If his actions are to be seen as legitimate and his endorsement of an agreement is to carry weight, he cannot appear as the president of only some Palestinians but must appear as the president of all; he cannot hand over, under pressure, critical decisions to outside parties but must assume them himself. He must be allowed to do what he considers right. Washington need not openly promote Palestinian unity. But it could stop standing in the way by signaling its acceptance of any reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah to which the Palestinian president lent his name. The US should continue to support Abbas. But it could stop placing him in that politically confining and damaging position where the fate of his people seems to be decided by others. If the goal is to strengthen Abbas, there is no better way.

How a peace initiative is received also will be a function of the regional climate. The more it is polarized between so-called moderates and radicals and the more the purpose appears to be to bolster the former while harming the latter, the more opposition will be energized. Militancy will find sympathetic ears. Among Palestinians, the sense will grow that the US is waging a battle in their name but not for their sake.

6.

From the first day of his presidency, which began as the Gaza war that traumatized the region and radicalized it further came to an end, Obama's Middle East challenge has been plain. He must win over the large pool of disaffected Arabs and Muslims who have ceased believing in the United States.

The climb will be steep. His election was a beginning, raising questions where not long before had reigned near-undivided, and negative, conviction. The new president can rely on more stirring rhetoric; he will enjoy a more receptive audience and will be looked at in a fresh light. That will take him only so far. He will be given the benefit of the doubt, but the doubt will remain colossal.

For the new president, the starting point should be recognition of some uncomfortable, brutal realities. These include the depth of inherited anti-American animus; of cynicism toward old plans and tired formulas; of popular estrangement from the regional leaders on whom Washington has come to depend; and of popular attraction to militant activists, militant behavior, and a radical worldview.

The consequence is that some well-worn recipes cannot work. Claiming eagerness to end the Arab-Israeli conflict or reach a two-state solution has become stale by dint of sterile repetition. President Bush did so, possibly more passionately and fervently than any predecessor. Yet few listened because few believed in what he said, least of all the Palestinians who were his supposed audience. Relying upon and bestowing aid to traditional Arab allies or seeking to improve their ties with Israel will not help much either. It would be preaching to the choir, burdening the Obama administration with the weight of unpopular figures and entrenching the notion that, at least in this respect, America is content with prolonging the past.

The time will come for the US to unfurl a grand diplomatic initiative. Not now. The most urgent task is to prepare the way for that day by countering the skepticism that has greeted and torpedoed every recent American idea, good or bad – from Secretary of State William Roger's 1969 plan to the road map. The time is for a clean break, in words, style, and approach.

For many in the US, the notion of such radical change often is reduced to the question of whether or not to talk to Hamas. That is a diversion. The challenge is whether Obama can speak to those for whom Hamas speaks. They are the people who have lost faith in America, its motivations, and every proposal it promotes.

The broader point is this: a window exists, short and subject to abrupt closure, during which President Obama can radically upset Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim preconceptions and make it possible for his future plan, whatever and whenever it might be, to get a fair hearing – for American professions of seriousness to be taken seriously. It won't be done by

repackaging the peace process of years past. It won't be done by seeking to strengthen those leaders viewed by their own people as at best weak, incompetent, and feckless, at worst irresponsible, careless, and reckless. It won't be done by perpetuating the bogus and unhelpful distinction between extremists and moderates, by isolating the former, reaching out to the latter, and ending up disconnected from the region's most relevant actors.

It won't be done by trying to perform better what was performed before. President Bush's legacy was, in this sense, doubly harmful: he did the wrong things poorly, which now risks creating the false expectation that, somehow, they can be done well.
