

April 7, 2010 Wednesday 23 Nisan 5770 12:01 IST  Print

THE JERUSALEM POST

JPOST.com
Israel's best-selling English daily and most-read English website



Photo by: AP

Will Obama ignite 3rd intifada?

By DANIEL GORDIS
26/03/2010

US president gives those seeking another round of violence a powerful excuse.

As I was departing the United States following a brief visit last week, the news being broadcast in the airport was preoccupied with Prime Minister Binyamin's Netanyahu's recent and apparently inadvertent snub of Vice President Joe Biden. Some 11 hours later, when I'd landed in Tel Aviv and was listening to the radio in the taxi on the way to Jerusalem, the news was of rioting in Jerusalem, the numbers of police officers injured, and the number of protesters detained during Hamas's "Day of Rage." On the American news, Hillary Clinton was calling for more than an apology, demanding "concrete steps" towards peace on Israel's part. And in Israel, the fluent-Hebrew-speaking Arab protester interviewed on the radio was calling for armed resistance to Israel's "assault on Jerusalem," insisting that the time for a third intifada had now arrived.

The radical difference between the broadcasts is an apt metaphor for the wholly different ways in which the current crisis in Israeli-American relations is perceived on the two sides of the ocean. The Americans are quite right to be incensed at the way Biden was treated. Whether Netanyahu was sandbagged by Interior Minister Eli Yishai, or whether this was simply another example of Israeli bureaucratic incompetence is not yet entirely clear. But it should never have happened.

Having said that, however, it is also clear that in the context of a generally positive relationship, Israel's insult to Biden would have been unfortunate, but it would have blown over almost immediately. The snub has had such massive repercussions because the relationship between the American and Israeli administrations is frayed, and wholly devoid of trust. The important question is why that is the case.

WHILE ISRAEL has obviously made some serious gaffes since Obama entered office, the real cause for this nadir in Washington-Jerusalem relations is the fact that Barack Obama seems to have little comprehension of the region on which he seeks to impose peace. The president's ignorance of the world in which he is operating is apparent on at least three levels. He seems unaware of how profoundly troubled Israelis are by his indiscriminate use of the word "settlement," he appears to have little comprehension of the history of Palestinian recalcitrance, and he has apparently learned little from decades of American involvement in the Middle East peace process.

First, there is the issue of the word "settlements." To the Israeli ear, anyone who would use the same noun for both a small city with tens of thousands of inhabitants and for a tiny hilltop outpost consisting of a trailer and a portable generator simply does not understand the terrain. Gilo, to Israelis, is not a settlement. It is a huge neighborhood of Jerusalem, a part of the capital city. When Obama called Gilo a settlement after Israel announced new housing units there in November, Israelis drew the conclusion that the president of the United States is wholly out of his element.

Similarly, Obama's demands for an absolute freeze on settlement construction strike Israelis as either foolish or unfair. Why, they ask, did all construction have to cease? Israelis who had planned to add a bedroom to their home for recently married children, who had already poured a foundation and ripped out the back wall of their home, were now told that nothing could proceed. When the president, who does not seem to know a city from an outpost, insists that houses remain open to the elements during the cold Israeli winter because of his desire to appease the very Palestinians who have never been serious about peace efforts, he does not win friends.

Nor, Israelis have noted, did Obama demand any similarly concrete concessions from the Palestinians or their puppet-president. That, too, has served Obama poorly in this country. And despite all this, Israelis believe the world has forgotten, Netanyahu acceded to Obama's demands for a freeze, at no small political cost.

Thus, when the Americans decided to make the undeniably ill-timed announcement of the Ramat Shlomo housing plans into a cause célèbre, Israelis were hard-pressed to feel contrite about anything beyond the personal hurt caused to Biden. Ramat Shlomo is an enormous neighborhood that is already home to some 20,000 people, and which is situated between the even larger neighborhoods of Ramot and Sanhedria. Ramat Shlomo is Jerusalem, period. Building there may be wise or unwise for a whole array of reasons, but for the Americans to seize on this as a "settlement construction" issue only further confirmed Israeli suspicions that Obama couldn't locate the neighborhood on a map.

THE SECOND major element that Obama appears not to understand is that the Palestinians' current refusal to conduct face-to-face negotiations has a long history; their recalcitrance has nothing at all to do with the settlements. The settlements, like the refugee problem (on which Israel will never compromise), and the division of Jerusalem (where some accommodation will almost certainly be forced on Israel), will be addressed when the Israelis and Palestinians sit down for face-to-face negotiations.

But Abbas has agreed only to mediated talks because he is unwilling to countenance the concessions that direct talks might ultimately require of him. The Palestinians have balked at every attempt to sign a substantive agreement with Israel. There remains virtually no Israeli political Left, not because of the Israeli Right, but because Yasser Arafat unleashed the Second Intifada when Ehud Barak called his bluff and offered him just about everything he could have expected, proving beyond any doubt that the Palestinian leadership had no interest in "land for peace."

For the Obama administration to suggest that the Palestinians cannot negotiate now because of settlement construction strikes Israelis as either hopelessly naïve, or worse, fundamentally hostile to the Jewish state.

And finally, despite his appreciable intellectual capacities, Barack Obama seems to have no appreciation of what America can and cannot do in the Middle East. He believes so deeply in the power of his own rhetoric that he imagines that he can evoke the passions of Grant Park on Election Day, or the Washington Mall on Inauguration Day, in a Muslim world that has disdain for the very democratic values that brought him to power. This is hubris at its most dangerous. Obama's Cairo speech was rhetorically brilliant, but the president has been snubbed. Iran has yet to grasp Obama's outstretched hand, and instead, proceeds apace in its quest for a nuclear weapon. The Palestinians have not budged. Yet Obama continues to believe that his eloquence will win the day.

Does Obama really not understand that this conflict has a long and consistent history? The Arabs rejected the UN Partition Plan in 1947, and refused a treaty at the end of Israel's War of Independence in 1949. After their defeat in June 1967, they gathered in Khartoum and declared "no peace, no recognition and no negotiations." Arafat said "no" at Camp David in 2000, and Abbas continues in that tradition. Why the American administration cannot or will not acknowledge that is one of the great wonders of this most recent train wreck.

WITH HIS laser focus on the settlements, Obama is ignoring the fact that Abbas wouldn't negotiate even if not a single settlement existed. In so doing, Obama has not only not moved the process forward, but he has afforded Abbas a refuge from responsibility, and he has given those who would like to ignite a third intifada an empty but symbolically powerful excuse for doing just that. A third intifada remains unlikely at present (though, it's worth noting, the IAF attacked Gaza targets this week and the IDF killed a Palestinian teenager during a scuffle – precisely the sort of innocuous events that could one day be seen as the first events of the third intifada), but should it happen, it will be, first and foremost, the product of Washington's naïveté.

Obama would be well-served to recognize that the history of this region is clear. Peace emerges when the two primary sides do the work themselves, with the United States entering late in the process to iron out stubborn details. Sadat went to Jerusalem without American urging, and though Jimmy Carter ultimately brought the two sides together to conclude the deal, the bulk of the work had been done by Sadat and Begin long before Carter entered the picture. The Nobel Committee, which once exercised much more subtle judgment, essentially acknowledged that fact by having Sadat and Begin split the 1978 Nobel Peace Prize, without including Carter.

The same was true with Rabin and Hussein, who worked on the Israeli-Jordanian peace deal. Clinton orchestrated the ceremony; but the principals had done most of the work without him.

And history suggests that only Israeli right-wingers can forge a deal. Israelis do not trust the Left to be security-conscious, and a left-wing government always has a right-wing flank blocking it. Obama may bristle at Netanyahu's hawkish rhetoric, but the more Obama weakens this prime minister, the less likely a deal will become. The US cannot wish democracy on Iraq, or peace on the Middle East. There will be a settlement of this conflict when the Palestinians are ready, not when Barack Obama decides to impose one.

SO, WHERE do we go from here? To begin to pull out of the present nose-dive, each of the parties will need to shift gears.

The Palestinians have to decide if they will take risks for peace, and if they can elect a president who is more than a figurehead. Last week's "Day of Rage," it should be noted, was called by Hamas – yet it unfolded not in Hamas' Gaza, but in Fatah's Jerusalem. Fatah needs a genuine leader, perhaps someone like Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, who is now saying that the Palestinians should first build the trappings of statehood, and only then declare independence down the road. It is no surprise that Shimon Peres recently compared Fayyad to David Ben-Gurion, the creator of the modern State of Israel.

The Israelis need to learn to play in the major leagues. When the American vice president visits, you need to have your act together. If Israeli leaders continue to act as if they run a banana republic, they will deservedly be so treated. But much more significantly, Netanyahu needs to apprise Israelis of his vision. Does he favor a two-state solution? What are his plans for Jerusalem? For the settlements? Let him tell us, and then we can decide. If we approve, he'll stay in office. And if we don't, he'll be gone. But we deserve to know what our prime minister has in mind.

In some respects, though, Barack Obama has the hardest job, at least in the short term. When he took office, there was no love lost between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and Gaza was still smoldering from the recently concluded Operation Cast Lead. But there was reasonable quiet on the West Bank and in Jerusalem, and a renewed Intifada was nowhere on our radar screen. Obama's blunderings have now restored the region's previous tinderbox qualities.

The president needs to back down from his relentless and fruitless focus on settlements, and concentrate more on what he doesn't yet know than on the power of his rhetoric. Should another intifada erupt, it will have had its seeds in a Washington more interested in the magic of its words than in the painful lessons of a century of history.

The writer is senior vice president of the Shalem Center in Jerusalem. His most recent book, Saving Israel: How the Jewish People Can Win a War That May Never End (Wiley), recently received a 2009 National Jewish Book Award. He blogs at <http://danielgordis.org>.



Print

[About Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [RSS](#)

All rights reserved © 1995 - 2009 The Jerusalem Post.

כל הזכויות שמורות © 2009- נט אפיקי תקשורת אינטר מדיה בע"מ