

(The National Interest, 04.06.2009)



President Barack Obama's speech on U.S. relations with the Muslim world in Cairo has already been labeled "historic" by MSNBC, though with no justification other than the fact that it was an hour long. Indeed, while Obama said a lot of the right things in the right style in the right place, he announced no major new initiatives or significant substantive departures from previous U.S. foreign-policy positions. Every American president, including even George W. Bush, publicly challenged the legality of Israeli settlements in occupied territories and described them as an obstacle to peace. Yet every Israeli government disregarded these declarations without encountering serious consequences. So it is not what President Obama says, but what he does on the Arab-Israeli dispute, and particularly on the settlements, that will shape how Muslims around the globe view the United States. In an NPR interview just before his departure for the Middle East, addressing the demand to freeze the settlements, Mr. Obama stated that "the United States has to follow through on what it says." If he truly means that, then a dramatic change in American policy is coming.

Hopefully President Obama will deliver, because he is playing with fire. He is creating great expectations and, without action to satisfy these expectations, will produce great disillusionment in the Muslim world. That would be another blow to U.S. credibility and a gift to terrorists and extremists. A new beginning with the Muslim world will require President Obama not only to talk the talk, but to walk the walk.

One major hurdle for Mr. Obama is that many in Congress, like Florida Representative Robert Wexler, portray a settlement freeze as an Israeli concession that ". . . we cannot ask one party to unilaterally perform if the other parties are not fully willing." This is a peculiar and dangerous logic. It is peculiar because it implies that Israel should be compensated for freezing the settlements, which were against international law in the first place. This is not to mention that they were contrary to the stated American policy of the past several decades, as well as morally wrong because of their impact on innocent Palestinians. Comments like those of Rep. Wexler are dangerous because they create the false impression that being more even handed would serve America well only if it leads to an agreement, rather than simply for the sake of doing the right thing and getting credit for it.

A peace agreement, should one be achieved, would very much be in the U.S. interest and

Obama's Israel Gamble

Пише: Dimitri K. Simes
петак, 05 јун 2009 23:59

would be a personal triumph for President Obama. However, while the United States may be indispensable in getting an agreement, it cannot force one; peace will require cooperation and, indeed, sacrifice by both sides, something we know from experience can only come through their willing participation. What is no less important, and what the United States *can* entirely control, is its own policy in the region. Moreover, it is not the lack of a peace agreement *per se*, but rather a widespread perception that the United States enables Israeli policies and actions that fuels hostility toward the United States among Muslims.

There are many longstanding conflicts in the world that the United States would prefer to settle but is not blamed for failing to solve. The India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir is a perfect example. With this in mind, anything the United States can do to demonstrate to the world's Muslims that it is not blindly in Israel's corner would greatly help the American image. Israel is a democracy and an ally of the United States, but America knows how to distance itself from actions considered to be against U.S. interests and principles, even actions by its closest allies. President Dwight Eisenhower sided with Egypt in 1956 against Britain, France and Israel during the Suez Crisis, when Britain was America's closest ally.

In the past there was a reason for the United States to make clear that it would always support Israel, no matter what. Faced with Soviet support for key Arab states, America could not afford the perception that allies of another superpower could defeat its closest friend in the region. Also, since Israel's military superiority over its neighbors was not as overwhelming as it is today, there was a legitimate concern that by distancing itself from Israel, America could encourage an Arab attack. These factors are no longer present and, as a result, America can afford to treat Israel like any other friendly state, supporting Israel when it is in U.S. interests to do so and letting Israel accept responsibility for its actions and their consequences when Israeli conduct does not correspond with U.S. interests.

This is exactly how Israel treats the United States. Just the other day in Moscow, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman publicly described Israel's friendly gestures toward Russia, which included refusing to recognize the independence of Kosovo and ceasing to sell weapons to Georgia beyond servicing those provided in the past. Mr. Lieberman also accused President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton of using double standards in the Middle East, meaning applying double standards against the Jewish state. When the Israeli foreign minister is prepared to talk like that in Moscow, Washington has every reason to move from the cold war-era blanket endorsements of Israel to the more selective support typical among sovereign states. So if Israel chooses to continue with its settlement expansion, the United States can and should make sure that the cost of settlements is deducted from any aid it provides to Israel—and that America abstains if the UN Security Council wants to censure Israel on the

issue.

A more even-handed U.S. position on the Arab-Israeli dispute is justified on its own merits, but if Mr. Obama will put his money—or rather the denial of it—where his mouth is, chances are that the Netanyahu government would retreat on the settlements. While the United States has been unable to bring about comprehensive peace so far, the Israelis have always complied when America shows it means business on specific issues. In 1956, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion reversed his refusal to withdraw Israeli forces from the Sinai Peninsula within hours after President Eisenhower informed him that “it would be a matter of the greatest regret to all my countrymen if Israeli policy on a matter of such grave concern to the world should in any way impair the friendly cooperation between our two countries.” In October 1973, the Israelis stopped their assault on the encircled Egyptian Third Army after Henry Kissinger emphatically told Israeli Ambassador Simcha Dinitz that its destruction “is an option that does not exist.” And in 1982, President Ronald Reagan forced Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin to abandon an attack on Beirut by threatening sanctions.

Mr. Obama has already discovered before seriously trying that applying meaningful pressure on Israel will create a powerful backlash from Israel's most ardent supporters in the United States. But the president is at the peak of his popularity and the very beginning of his term; as long as he stands tall, while making clear as he did in Cairo that the United States' basic bond with Israel “is unbreakable,” he can weather the storm. And Mr. Netanyahu knows from his previous term as prime minister of Israel that being on the wrong end of U.S. animosity is not a prescription for political longevity in Israel. Even with his fragile coalition, he may be able to find a way to accommodate the United States on the settlements. It would not bring instant Arab-Israeli peace or, for that matter, restore American credibility in the Muslim world, but it would surely be a good start.

Dimitri K. Simes is the publisher of *The National Interest*