

Re-Floating the Obama Presidency: Difficulties in Foreign Policy

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After seven years of the disastrous decision to invade Iraq, and following almost two decades of on-again, off-again Israeli-Palestinian fruitless negotiations, President Barack Obama announced the completion of the first phase of withdrawing from Mesopotamia and inaugurated another round of face-to-face talks about peace in the Middle East. Coming at a time of extreme anxiety about the American economy that could shift the balance of power in Washington after next November's mid-term elections, the American president's foreign policy actions can be seen as an attempt to re-float his administration and give it renewed vigour and purpose. But the president should be aware of the difficulties on the road to a peaceful Iraq and the pitfalls hindering peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

The withdrawal of combat forces from Iraq came as a realization of the president's vision since before his election and ascension to the White House. One could say that he actually wishes to end all military presence in the country if conditions warrant because of the cost in lives, treasure, and prestige that the ill-fated decision has brought upon the United States. (One can only imagine what he could have done had

former Vice President Dick Cheney's vision of conquering Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and HAMAS come to fruition, as former British Prime Minister Tony Blair exposes in his memoirs.) But wishes do not a foreign policy make. Iraq is still a very stubborn work-in-progress, especially now that American tools of pressure have either been withdrawn or are being prepared for final withdrawal at the end of 2011.

The formation of an Iraqi government that could assuage the US Administration's anxiety is still being held hostage by a number of factors including outside interference and personal ambition. Ironically, it appears that the United States is the weakest link in this interference. Frequent visits by American officials to the Iraqi capital have failed to assure an American *fait accompli* that is usually expected with US presence. Instead, Iran holds considerable sway that allows it to thwart any agreements not guaranteeing its interests. Similarly, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Turkey seem to use their bargaining chips to ensure theirs.

Moreover, the United States, and after lifting a new Iraqi elite to power, does not seem to be able to convince the different factions of this elite to forego individualistic preferences and ambitions for the sake of a possible compromise that protects collective wellbeing. Iraq is left adrift between merciless terrorists and corrupt officials and politicians while its economy deteriorates and state institutions are expropriated in a sectarian division of power devoid of any

nationalist feeling. In the meantime, solutions for problems like the unresolved issue of Kirkuk, inter-ethnic and inter-religious rivalries, and the not-yet-understood future relation between Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government are postponed until addressing them becomes impossible.

President Obama's foray into brokering an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal seems no less difficult given the positions held by the parties and the American well-known inability to pressure the Israeli government to make the necessary concessions. The president and his aides have promised diligent attempts and dedication to successful negotiations as they consciously downgrade expectations from the talks. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu resists giving any hints about possible concessions he might offer; simply because he may not offer any.

Alternatively, he demands that Israel be recognized an exclusively Jewish state (thus putting the fate of 20% of Israel's citizens in doubt of their future and denying millions of diaspora Palestinians the right of return). He posits that security should trump border issues (thus assuring the survival of strategic settlements and Israel's dominance over a rump Palestinian state). He also reiterates the old Israeli mantra about the indivisibility of Jerusalem (thus denying any Palestinian sovereignty over any parts of the city as home of a Palestinian capital in the future). And Netanyahu's biggest political excuse is his unwillingness to break up his governing

coalition, as if political considerations should be enough to sanction illegal settlement activities and occupation.

On the other side, the Palestinians have been divided long before the resumption of negotiations, making any success hostage to approval by HAMAS and a cohort of similar factions that do not see any hope in talking with the Israelis. The Palestinian negotiators themselves, President Mahmoud Abbas and his team, have stated that they will not simply go along with American wishes without assurances that freezing settlement activities continue beyond its September 26, 2010, deadline. Abbas' agreement not to condition the Palestinian Authority's participation in the talks on Israel's acceding to his demands about sovereignty, borders, Jerusalem, and the Palestinian diaspora should not be seen as relinquishing Palestinian rights but as a response to American and Arab pressures. His stance about all these issues before the resumption of direct talks shows that he will not accept a simple dictation of Israeli terms. Additionally, he and his Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, have already begun working on their version of a Palestinian state that they believe to be the right avenue for eventual sovereignty no matter what the Israelis and Americans think.

Experts think foreign policy can be used as a tool in national politicians' hands to re-direct energies and create new facts on the ground to help them avoid difficulties at home. Alternatively, domestic conditions sometimes dictate the necessity for foreign

policy initiatives. In President Obama's case, both of these situations obtain, aided as his days in office have shown by a genuine interest in withdrawing from Iraq and bringing peace to the Middle East. The president should be lauded for both initiatives, withdrawing and sponsoring peace talks. But he should also be aware that continuing political chaos and instability in Iraq and the inability to persuade and cajole in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations can only make his domestic troubles deeper and more damaging.

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Obama-Netanyahu-Abbas image:

http://www.swamppolitics.com/news/politics/blog/2009/09/obama_mideast_time_to_move_for.html

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