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Obama's failure in the Middle East

To say that the United States has for years played a pivotal role in the diplomatic effort in the Middle East is almost a cliché, particularly with reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Admittedly, ever since the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the USA has served as a catalyst for progress in the Middle East peace process. While what counted at the end of the day was the will to reconcile on the part of the parties directly involved in the conflict, i.e. the Jews and the Palestinians, one can hardly overlook the extent of Washington's influence. The US involvement has helped advance the Middle East peace process quite considerably during the Bill Clinton presidency leading to the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in a substantial part of the territories handed over by Israel.

Even George W. Bush worked tirelessly towards significant peace solutions. He went down in history not only as the leader who started the unfortunate Iraq war but also as the architect of a lasting accord between the Jews and the Palestinians. This notwithstanding, Bush's position and political credibility on the international scene, especially in the Muslim world, have diminished to the extent where, by the end of his term, Washington lost all of its clout and influence. At any rate, the Middle East wrote its own scenarios. During the windup period of the Bush presidency, Israel carried out a tragic military operation in the Gaza Strip seeking to crush the radical *Hamas*. The operation left Palestinians with a death toll of more than 1100. In its aftermath, the Middle East peace process collapsed completely dashing all hopes for Bush succeeding in his efforts.

Such was the state of affairs inherited by Bush's successor, Barack Obama. Obama ceaselessly criticized Bush's Middle East policy blaming the Republican administration for inefficiency and poor choice of emphasis in giving the majority of its support to Israel while losing the trust of the Palestinians/Arabs. He claimed that the approach not only failed to help Israel achieve peace but also further undermined America's reputation in the Islamic world. He declared that resolving the Middle East conflict would become one of the priorities of his foreign policy and that "an alternative path" would be taken to accomplish it. As a consequence, Obama raised great hopes. Just as Washington was expected to effectively resolve many of the other issues and challenges faced by the Obama administration, so were constructive proposals and breakthrough solutions anxiously awaited in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The new President decided that his "own path" in Middle East politics would be to distance himself slightly from Israel while embracing Palestinian claims. This meant he would more forcefully support the Palestinian view and demands, among them those concerning the formation of a Palestinian state. With respect to Israel, the US president chose to be more critical and uncompromising, especially in demanding that the development of Jewish settlements in the West Bank be discontinued or that Israel be restored to its pre-1967 borders. Furthermore, other than his predecessors, Obama failed to establish a close personal bond with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The two never developed an atmosphere of mutual trust, understanding and cooperation and instead tended to display dislike and reserve. All this despite the obvious potential that a cordial relationship between US Presidents and Israeli Prime Ministers has long been known to have on the Middle East peace building process.

Another sign of Obama's distancing himself from the Jewish state was his failure to make even a single visit to Israel during his first term of office despite having traveled to other "neighboring" countries of the Middle East and having delivered his first speech in Cairo (whose crucial importance lied in the fact it inaugurated Obama's efforts to resolve the Middle East crisis), at which Israel took offense. Obama subsequently followed up with a number of other gestures which Israel would find awkward. And even though they were all offset by Obama administration's continued strategic aid to Israel to the tune of well above US\$ 30 billion annually, the aid appeared to be less of a factor in evaluating the work of the US President.

The key element were Israeli responses. The prevalent sentiment was that Washington betrayed Israeli interests. By categorically stating, on multiple occasions, his



expectations of the Jewish state which were largely unrealistic, as they concerned state security, President Obama drastically strained their trust, as Israelis saw it. Especially so that he not only served as a mouthpiece for the Palestinians but also, as was claimed, nearly identified himself with their views. Even though such opinions were largely the result of the Jewish residents of Israel being oversensitive, they nevertheless revealed circumstances which were unprecedented in American-Israeli relations. Rather than creating better prospects for the peace process, President Obama only widened the gap between Washington and Jerusalem. Instead of strengthening its power of influence over Israel's policy, he lost its trust and found himself unable to soften Netanyahu's policy towards Palestine.

To make things worse, Obama's tactic also appeared to be failing on the other side of the dispute. It turned out soon enough that Obama administration's show of good will and support for Palestinian demands and, in particular, its emphatic declarations of support for the establishment of their state, was mere lip service. For a number of reasons, some of them having to do with electoral calculations and attempts to curry favor with the pro-Israel lobby, Obama was not consistent in his backing of Palestine. In fact, he went so far as to veto Palestinian's bid for UN membership in September 2011 just as a US representative did in the General Assembly of the United Nations in late November 2012 (at the time, the opposition did not prevent the Palestinian Authority from obtaining the status of a non-member state of the UN). From the viewpoint of the Muslim world, President Obama turned out to be ineffective and, even more importantly, has lost credibility and disillusioned the Palestinians.

Further "about-faces" in Middle East policies, so common throughout the Obama presidency, left Palestinians without a state and, for an extended time, even without a representation in the United Nations. Meanwhile, Israel maintained its hard line towards the Palestinian Authority and its demands. To further compound the problems, prospects were gloomy for restoring Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Obama's "own path" turned out to be a mistake. While it contributed to deteriorating relations with Israel, making it hard to achieve a compromise of any sort, it also disappointed the Palestinian/Arab community by failing to deliver on its promises.

And while the blame for the current state of affairs cannot be pinned on the United States alone, as neither Israel demonstrated a will to compromise nor did the Palestinians show an openness to concessions, the American President's mistakes have caused incomparably more damage. Commentators largely agreed in their assessment of Obama's Middle East policy: "Nowhere in Obama's foreign policy is there a wider gap between what



has been promised and what has been achieved with respect to the Middle East”, wrote Martin S. Indyk, a leading US Middle East expert, in 2012.

Worst of all, however, the Middle East peace process ended up in a complete standstill. Both sides of the conflict withdrew much of their support for attempts to renew negotiations with distrust towards Obama shown by both Israel and Palestine further aggravating the situation.

Soon after the start of Obama's second term in the White House, Washington launched a diplomatic offensive in the Middle East nominating Senator John Kerry, a man considered to be one of the best friends that Israel had in the US Congress, to the post of America's head of diplomacy. In March 2013, Obama made his first presidential visit to Israel. After a series of visits to Middle Eastern capitals, Israel and the Palestinian Authority, Secretary of State Kerry announced, in July 2013, that the peace talks have been resumed. At that time, Washington appointed M.S. Indyk Special Envoy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. An appointment of a man known for his criticism of Obama's Middle East policies suggested the White House sought to undertake a whole new diplomatic effort in the region.

Without getting into any further elaborate details of US attempts to resolve the Middle East conflict during the last dozen plus months (suffice it to mention Indyk's resignation as Special Envoy, which was clearly an implicit admission of his mission's failure), one may judge the dubious effectiveness of Washington's efforts by the recent developments unfolding on the Israeli - Gaza Strip border. In early July 2014, military operations between Israel and the terrorist organization *Hamas* controlling the Gaza Strip escalated considerably. The region has again come to the brink of war whose scale is hard to image even today. Regardless of whether it is the supporters of *Hamas*, who murdered young Israelis, or Israel's rightist radicals, who retaliated by murdering a young Palestinian, that should be held accountable for this outbreak of the bloodiest Israeli-Palestinian fighting in years, the prospects of restoring peace in the region are again minimal if not nil.

What is most perplexing at the current stage of the Middle East crisis is that Washington's response in the region has remained insignificant. Other than several appeals to parties of the conflict to conclude an immediate cease-fire and take advantage of President Obama's offer of assistance in the negotiation, the US diplomacy has done nothing, at least not officially. Instead, it was Egypt that became the main mediator in the conflict as it is well known to have done repeatedly in the past. Nevertheless, the key player has always been the United States which would exert pressure and make commitments, also



to Egypt, thereby initiating successive moves from its “back-seat position”. It has been in this manner that Washington played a vital role in the Middle East during the last decades.

The surprising recent inertia on the part of the United States may have been caused by a number of factors. It is unlikely to have resulted from Obama administration’s reluctance to engage in reconciling the parties. A more probable cause is that the US administration has lost the instruments it could traditionally resort to in handling the parties to the Middle East conflict and effectively influencing developments in the region. At the present time, President Obama's administration is not trusted as Obama has failed the test as Israel’s ally and shown his personal aversion to dealing with Israeli politicians. On the other hand, the Palestinians/Arabs have been disappointed with the ineffectiveness and lack of credibility of the current US administration which, delivered very little, coming across as “hypocritical and deceitful”. Expectedly aware of all this, Obama’s administration must feel that, in a sense, “its hands are tied”. Especially that no visible progress has been achieved despite earnest attempts by Secretary of State Kerry to breathe new life into the peace process.

As a consequence, the current stage of the Middle East conflict has been proof positive that US policies in the region have failed miserably and that there is very little that the Obama administration can do to bring Palestinians and Jews back to the negotiating table.

An appropriate question at this point would be whether the time has come for European Union to make its mark in the Middle East region by assuming the tedious role as a mediator now that America no longer appears to be up to the task. Especially that there is precedence for such an intervention. It was, after all, the mediation by the countries of Europe (the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy, Spain and the Czech Republic) that led to the signing in January 2009 of an understanding which ended war in the Gaza Strip. For the time being, however, much like the United States, the European Union has not ventured beyond appealing for a cease fire and for protecting civilian population.

Although European institutions are in the difficult phase of appointments to fill their key roles, they need to recognize this is a vital moment. It is high time that the European Union demonstrate its ability to become an important actor on the international scene. Despite all of the difficulties it faces, Europe is not weighed down, to the extent that the United States is, by having left a bitter mark on the Muslim world. On the contrary, it has traditionally offered economic and financial support, not least to the Palestinian Authority. It might well capitalize on this reputation now by applying pressure on the parties to lay down arms and restore peace talks. Or at least become involved in the reconciliation effort. Even



without a strong leadership at the moment, the European Union should do its best to rise to the occasion.

The statements expressed in this text exclusively reflect the views of its author.

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