

Ingongruous “Peacemaking” in the Middle East: Clinton ’s Unpromising Start

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Global Research, May 01, 2009

1 May 2009

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

Incongruous. One can hardly think of a more suited term to describe the new US administration’s approach to peacemaking in the Middle East . Though there is little evidence that previous US administrations had genuinely attempted to play a balanced role in forging a just peace between Israel and the Palestinians, many hoped — and a few still hope — that Barack Obama’s administration would bring about new standards.

However, if recent comments made by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suffice as a general indication of the administration’s Middle East policy, then little change is on the horizon.

Clinton told US legislators 23 April that the key to peace between Israel and the Palestinians was Tehran ; that without getting tough on Iran , Israel could not be expected to pursue peace with the Palestinians. “The two go hand in hand,” she emphasised. What a baffling approach to peacemaking. In order for peace to prevail, Israel should engage Mahmoud Abbas’s Palestinian Authority in “discussions” aimed at inspiring the isolation of Iran , for reasons entirely pertinent to US interests and Israeli “security”.

While Clinton ’s approach rests on luring Israel into her proposed peace discussions, what is Clinton ’s promise to the Palestinians, the Arabs, and indeed Iran but endless chatter, a regional cold war and sectarian divisions? Hasn’t the Middle East seen enough of that? Is it not time to relegate such detrimental language and focus on positive engagement, regional stability and economic cooperation?

In fact, there is concrete evidence that supports the claim that a responsible US policy in the region could indeed usher in a new beginning, which would ultimately prove beneficial to the US in a time of economic meltdown and repeated crises. For example, Iran has made clear its intentions of espousing dialogue with the US, Hamas is openly seeking “engagement”, and Hizbullah — which seems committed to Lebanon’s stability — is positively responding to EU diplomatic overtures.

However, it seems that the new US administration with all the gutsy talk of boldness, daring and audacity is still unwilling or unable to confront Israel ’s chaotic and destructive behaviour in Palestine and in the Middle East at large.

Clinton should have used entirely different language and adopted a wholly different approach if she and her administration were keenly interested in investing in a just peace, and not mere “discussions”. Instead of trying to entice Israel to engage the Palestinians long enough to deceive the Arabs and alienate Iran , she should have dealt — and strongly so — with the provocative politics disseminated by Israel ’s new right-wing government.

Israeli leaders, confident of their country's revered status among Western governments, which immunizes it from any consequential criticism, are lashing out left and right.

Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, recognised in many circles as "fascist", is leading Israel's diplomatic offensive, a strategy used and perfected by previous Israeli governments. The aim of the offensive is to condition any Israeli "concessions" on specific demands, whose implementation often elicits anything but peace and stability.

Lieberman told The Jerusalem Post on 23 April that it would be "impossible to resolve any problem in our region without resolving the Iranian problem". One can only guess what "resolving the Iranian problem" means and requires. However, it's important to recall that it was Lieberman who launched his newest career by rejecting the Annapolis peace conference outcomes, reverting to the roadmap solely because the latter requires nothing of Israel until Palestinians completely crack down on "terror". Under Israel's definition of terrorist groups, which also includes the elected Palestinian government, Lieberman's true objective is to absolve Israel from any expectations pertaining to peace, dialogue or even simple discussions.

Lieberman is not only agitated by the largely discretionary requirements placed on Israel, but by the language itself. "Over the last two weeks I've had many conversations with my colleagues around the world. And everybody, you know, speaks with you like you're in a campaign: occupation, settlements, settlers," said Lieberman, who described those using such language as "speaking in slogans".

Lieberman is, of course, not the eccentric loner of the Israeli government, but in many ways represents the emerging status quo in Israel, with all of its alarming tendencies. Haaretz reported that Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is angry over an EU attempt at linking closer ties with Israel with the latter's commitment to a two-state solution. "Peace is in Israel's interest no less than it is in Europe's interest, and there's no need to make the upgrade in relations with Israel conditional on progress on the peace process. We are in the process of reviewing our policy; don't rush us," Netanyahu reportedly told visiting Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek.

Netanyahu was helpful enough to elaborate on what he meant by "peace is in Israel's interest," when he said: "If Israelis can't build homes in the West Bank then Palestinians shouldn't be allowed to either," in reference to the expansion of illegal Jewish settlements and destruction of Arab homes.

Lieberman, on the other hand, has dashed any hopes that Israel might find the Arab peace initiative a common ground for peacemaking, according to Haaretz, reporting on 24 April. He rejected it, in part, because it stipulates a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem in accordance with international law. Moreover, he called on the international community to stop pushing for a Palestinian state.

Not only does Israel want to preserve its matrix of control over the West Bank, annex Arab lands, and maintain its illegal settlements in violation of international law, but it also wants to control the language, silence mere calls for Palestinian statehood, and lead a world of fury, including that of the Arabs, against Iran. So much for peacemaking.

Under such a reality, it behoves Clinton and the Obama administration to abandon the tired slogans and the old, belligerent policies of their predecessor. If they are indeed interested in

a just peace, for its own sake, then luring Israel to engage Abbas only to trick the Arabs and isolate Iran cannot be a promising start.

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