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Polarized region, elusive peace

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US President Barack Obama may be the right man to facilitate Middle East peace, but given the current climate, achieving anything of worth toward that goal would be nothing short of a miracle. Obama strongly backs a two-state solution and is proactively reaching out to the Muslim world. Moreover, unlike his predecessor, he's not an ideologue who has to nurture a right-wing evangelical base and he has displayed a willingness to listen to all sides. Of course, it is almost a given that any American president is going to lean in Israel's favor and Obama is no exception. Although if he was free to follow his conscience, there is speculation that he wouldn't so much 'lean' as 'tilt'.

Sadly, however, whether Obama will be the first American commander in chief with intentions of being an honest broker or otherwise is purely academic at this stage. Regional players have become so polarized in their opinions that he would need Merlin's wand to bring them onto the same page.

Israelis have voted into office, arguably, one of the most right-wing, nationalistic governments in their country's history. Neither Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu nor his Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman has any interest in pursuing a two-state solution. Instead, they are continuing to demolish Palestinian homes within East Jerusalem and to expand illegal Jewish colonies on Palestinian land that contravene their obligations under the road map. Moreover, they have dealt the Israel-Syrian peace track a blow by swearing that they will never relinquish the Golan Heights.

On Monday, Netanyahu met with Obama in Washington amid some predictions that the two were likely to clash. Other pundits took the view that instead of clashing with his Israeli counterpart, Obama would cave. If Netanyahu can be persuaded to even utter the words 'two-

state solution?, this will be considered somewhat of a coup for the US administration, but, in reality, this step will be virtually meaningless.

Even if the Israeli leader superficially panders to America's will, when it comes to the nitty-gritty, he will merely drag his heels, just as Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert did. Such long-term stalling in itself is a way to quash the dream of a Palestinian state because, over time, settlement expansion and demolitions change the reality on the ground. Writing in the Los Angeles Times on Monday, Palestinian democracy activist Mustafa Barghouti had this to say:

?Will the Obama administration have the courage to challenge Netanyahu? Or will all the talk of change dissolve in the face of a conceited one-two punch from Netanyahu and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee? I am increasingly convinced that if Obama fails to speak out now, it will doom the two-state solution forever. Further fiddling in Washington ? after eight years of it ? will consign Jerusalem, the West Bank and the two-state solution to an Israeli expansionism that will overwhelm the ability of cartographers to concoct a viable Palestinian state.?

Barghouti is absolutely right but, unfortunately, Netanyahu will come to the meeting armed with indisputable arguments that he will tout as precluding peace. Israeli leaders have historically wrongly claimed that Israel does not have a partner for peace, but on this occasion Netanyahu would be correct. Fatah and Hamas are still at odds despite attempts by Saudi Arabia and Egypt to bring them together. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas may be the West's designated peacemaker but, in the first instance, his presidential term of office has expired, and secondly, he does not represent most Palestinians.

Netanyahu will further cite Iran as being an existential threat to his country and in this connection he will stress that the long arm of Iran stretches to Hamas as well as the Lebanese political and military Hezbollah organization, which is likely to win the upcoming June 7 election on a promise to vigorously defend the country from Israeli aggression. Netanyahu will argue, ?How can we be expected to make peace with people who are being financed and armed by our archenemy and who refuse to accept Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state?? Divisions within the Arab world between so-called ?moderates? who fear Iran's growing influence, and others who sway toward nationalism or pan-Arabism, are also hindering Obama's counter arguments.

In a nutshell, fate has played a cruel trick. For decades, people in this part of the world have longed for someone as well-intentioned and empathetic as Obama to come along. But there's no getting away from it. He has turned up at a time when the Middle East has rarely been as polarized. The only slim chance of success he may have is if the Palestinians swiftly repair their fractures and the Arab world unites to speak with one loud voice. Makes sense doesn't it? But then again, common sense and this six decades-long conflict are like oil and water.

In a world where man has conquered space, made long-distance face-to-face communication as easy as pressing a key and has cracked our genetic make-up, we can only conclude that the only reason people are still suffering in this region is due to a lack of collective will. Getting people around a table is hardly rocket science yet the Middle East peace table might as well be on Jupiter for all the use it gets

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