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'Palestinian hurting their cause by pursuing unilateral statehood'

Avi Issacharoff

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Article Author(s): Avi Issacharoff

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The outgoing chairman of the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, Howard Berman (D-CA), talks to Haaretz about the Palestinians' plan for unilateral declaration of statehood, Turkey's ties with Israel and the U.S., and President Barack Obama's foreign policy.

There are some fears of a stalemate in foreign policy following the midterm elections. What are the chances of cooperation between the parties, especially as the 2012 elections approach?

It would be tragic for this country if partisan fights undermine the importance of international leadership by the U.S., and I don't think they will. I will give you a little example regarding a very deep conflict over taxes - and the ability to find a compromise, which I think will be accepted. This election was not about foreign affairs, but about jobs, deficits, and the president seems to find an ability to work through these issues with the other party. The need also to do it on foreign affairs is so clear that I just can't believe that the Republican leadership in the Congress would be so irresponsible as to want to weaken American security for partisan interests.

The direct talks collapsed, the Israelis don't want an American plan, the Palestinians don't believe the Israelis are ready for concessions, and in about two years we have the elections. Is there still any chance for an agreement?

The administration is not backing away from pushing the peace process; it is not taking Tom

Friedman's advice. Senator Mitchell is over there, they are pushing the proximity talks now about different core issues. I've read the prime minister's statements where he sounds prepared to discuss these issues as long as the proximity talks will lead to direct talks, which I think is very important - and, by and large, the administration is doing what they should be doing on this issue.

If you looked at the atmosphere in 1991-1992, would you have predicted the Oslo process? Was there a reason to think that [then Prime Minister Ehud] Barak would propose what he proposed in Camp David? Who would expect [former Egyptian President Anwar] Sadat to give a speech where he announced he is willing to go to Jerusalem? Everybody understands how difficult this is, and I can't understand why the Palestinians aren't moving as expeditiously as they can, since they want a state.

What role should Congress play in the process? Recently the Palestinian representative in the U.S. told Haaretz that all those letters of support of one side are not helpful.

Does he think that the appropriation of half a billion dollars in funding for the Palestinian Authority and the security forces and the economic development projects and the sanitation projects - does he think it's a form of Congressional interference? Congress is deeply interested in this issue, we have a deep historical and bipartisan commitment to the survival and security of the State of Israel, and we've embraced over and over again two states living in peace side-by-side. He may wish whatever he wants, but he cannot expect Congress not to get involved in one of the most important international issues.

If more countries around the world would recognize the Palestinian state, following the trio in Latin America - would it be difficult for America?

I think this is delusional on the part of the Palestinians. They are not going to get a state through this process. The U.S. is not going to support trying to get a state through this process. This is not going to produce what they want. I read somewhere that 104 countries have recognized the Palestinian state [since the 1988 PNC declaration], and it has made no difference in the Palestinians' situation.

Two things are going on that have real possibilities. One is what Prime Minister [Salam] Fayyad is doing on the ground on security and economic issues, with the cooperation of the Israelis and great support from the U.S. and others, to create the institutions of statehood. At the other level, the Israeli prime minister has taken the position that he accepts the goal here of two states - a Jewish State of Israel and a viable and independent Palestinian state.

So the process exists, and the administration is pushing - those two things give me some hope. The attempts of the Palestinians to pursue other countries to persuade them to recognize Palestine as a state - it's pursuit of a declaration, not a state. It's self-defeating, and it's going to hurt their cause.

I remember vividly how Arafat, after saying no at Camp David, ran around Europe trying to get European governments to recognize the Palestinian state. It came to no end, and then came the intifada, with terrible damage and casualties on both sides. Nothing positive came out of that, either.

The recent deal proposed by the American administration - so-called "jets for settlement freeze" - was criticized heavily. Was it a mistake?

I am going to look forward, not backward. Obviously a number of things that were tried didn't work, and the administration is trying something else, and hopefully it will work.

What would you define as a success and a failure of the president's foreign policy?

At the top of the Obama administration's successful efforts to change relations with the world is relations with Russia, but one of my disappointments is the administration's inability, in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to get Arab governments to take meaningful steps to create a dynamic to get this process going faster. This was the goal the administration set, and they've not been able to achieve it.

Is Turkey a friend of the West? Is it looking for other alliances?

It's a very important country. The nature of the relations did change - when Turkey voted at the Security Council against the U.S. on sanctions against Iran - that's not the actions of a very close ally. I am also bothered by the way Turkey deals with Hamas, not so much that they have a relationship with Hamas. But I never hear the Turkish political leadership pushing Hamas to disavow violence, to do what Turkey has done for so long - namely, to recognize Israel's right to exist. And never to acknowledge that what Israel faces from Hamas-controlled Gaza is exactly what Turkey faces from the PKK. Turkey has dealt with the PKK as aggressively as you can, over and over again with use of force. Tell me, how is it different from rockets going from Gaza to Israel? But there are other areas where Turkey is doing important things. They are helping us with Afghanistan, they help us in holding Iraq together and promoting democratic transition. So the ledger is not all negative.

It seems that the U.S. administration is disappointed by the Syrian leadership's response to its outreach.

I share that disappointment. It doesn't seem like Syria has really decided to take a different course [than it was pursuing previously]. The president of Syria has to decide whether he wants to continue the current situation where he is one of Iran's only friends. Syria is the vehicle for Iran's arming of Hezbollah and providing sanctuary for Hamas leaders. If President Assad wants to keep going this way, he is not going to end up being embraced by the U.S., and he's not going to get the Golan back. Ultimately, he has to decide which way to go.

What grade you would give President Obama's foreign policy?

I'd give him a good grade. Take, for example, his decision to engage the Muslim world. By and large, I think that to have a war with a billion Muslims is not a viable policy. We have to engage with the forces of modernity in the Muslim world. We have to separate moderates from extremists, and engagement that is designed to achieve that makes compelling sense to me. The engagement policy is not a success yet, but that doesn't mean it's a failure. We have to give it more time. In two years, we may have a clearer answer as to whether and how it's working, and I may be able to give you a better answer.

Russia is another success story for Obama's diplomacy. Dealing with Russia differently than we did in the past helped us with Iran - and also it helped in terms of making Russia look toward the West. President Obama has prepared the ground for things that can come to be

real successes, but the full story hasn't been written yet.

The debate over the sanctions against Iran remains heated, and Israeli politicians are wondering why the U.S. administration took the military option off the table, even if they didn't say so explicitly.

The military option is not off the table. It's on the table.

The Iranians apparently don't think so.

Who knows what they really think? We don't know if the current strategy is going to work. We do know that two years ago we had the most limited, worthless set of multilateral sanctions on Iran that were not enforced, and all the U.S. efforts to make them stronger were to no avail. And the U.S. position on Iran was not the international position, the U.S. was isolated and everyone wrote that Iran is rising in influence.

Two years later we have tough sanctions at the Security Council, and the U.S. and Europeans imposed more far-reaching sanctions. We have evidence it's causing pain in Tehran inside the regime, Iran feels the pressure and is isolated, and the U.S. position as a result of this administration's policies has developed international support.

What we don't know yet is if it will change the regime's behavior on the nuclear issue. But we are in a much better position to create that change than we were two years ago. And we need to stay very resolved on this, we need to impose sanctions on companies that are undermining our efforts, and we need to build even more international support. This is an example of this administration's effective use of diplomacy.




Where in the world is the biggest concern for the U.S.? Is it Afghanistan? China? North Korea? The Middle East?

Yes, yes and yes. We have a huge number of issues that affect our interests. The global economy, what's going to happen in Pakistan, Iraq is still not a totally done deal, but for me Iran looms at the top of the list. If Iran gets a nuclear weapons capability, at so many levels stability and peace are threatened - for Israel, but also for the whole region and the rest of the world, too. So there are a number of big national security interests, but Iran is, for me, first and foremost.

Do you expect the Republican party to undo many major aspects of the Obama administration's reforms?

No, I do not believe that. I believe that some of the things will remain and become more popular with the American people. This same thing has happened repeatedly in American history. In the 1930s the Republicans opposed every aspect of the New Deal. They opposed social security, they opposed minimum wage laws. They opposed a lot of the public works projects during the Depression, but the American people ended up supporting those projects and the Republicans quit trying to undo them.

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