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Palestinians deserve justice, not apathy

Adel Safty

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John Kerry, the former presidential candidate and the veteran chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, has just returned from his first trip to Europe and the Middle East as secretary of state.

At the press conference with British Foreign Secretary William Hague, Kerry gave the impression that the Middle East did not figure prominently in his discussion with Hague. In his opening statement Hague said: "Top of our agenda was the Middle East, including the importance we both attach to ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict..."

When Kerry spoke, he touched on trade, Syria, Iran and only at the end he spoke about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. And as if to make sure Israeli leaders understood the underlying message that "the president was coming [to Israel] in a listening, not a dictating, mode." Kerry said "I want to consult and the president wants to listen."

But consulting and listening does not mean they cannot propose ideas and explore alternatives. In fact both US President Barack Obama and Kerry are quite anxious to achieve a breakthrough agreement and, at least the president may have already developed a set of Obama's perimeters, likely largely similar to the Clinton perimeters. There are numerous good reasons for this low profile in public, high profile in substance interpretation

First, the paralysing effect that the Israel lobby exercises over publicly elected officers is removed. Obama no longer has to worry about losing the crucial support of the American

Jewish community if he dares to be assertive In pursuit of a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He has been reelected with a comfortable majority. No longer worried about re-election, he has his gaze on his place in history.

Secondly, the new approach of low public profile has the merit of not threatening Israeli leaders who, in a confrontational environment, would be more reluctant to make any concessions lest they be accused of compromising Israel's security.

During Obama's first term, he learned this reality the hard way on at least two occasions. First when he publicly demanded that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu places a complete freeze on all colony-building activities in the Occupied Territories. This was not only an American demand, it was also an Israeli obligation contracted under the roadmap — the basic peace plan the Quartet (US, Russia, European Union and the United Nations) have endorsed and have trying unsuccessfully to move forward.

Netanyahu publicly and defiantly refused.

The second clash between Obama and Netanyahu occurred when Obama suggested that Israeli and Palestinian negotiators should use the 1967 lines as a point of departure. Netanyahu right there and then looked at his host and rejected the idea lecturing Obama at the White House: Mr. President these lines are not defensible. Publicly humiliated twice, Obama dropped his pursuit of peace in the Middle East and switched to election mode. His speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2010 was an unabashed defence of Israel.

Thirdly, Obama worked hard to correct the misperception that he is not a friend of Israel. Earlier last year he addressed the powerful Israel lobby known as the American-Israel Political Action Committee (Aipac) and delivered a staunchly pro-Israel speech. After going through a long list of pro-Israel actions undertake by his administration, he assured his audience: "When the chips are down, I have got Israel's back."

During the latest Israeli assault on the Palestinian people in Gaza, Obama seems to have gone beyond the call of duty in providing Israel with apparently unprecedented level of military, economic, and diplomatic support. This earned him unprecedented praise from the Israelis and especially from Netanyahu. More recently Denis Ross, the perpetual envoy to the Middle East of several administrations and arch Zionist himself, said that "what the president has done for Israel in the security area is without precedent".

This seems to have rehabilitated Obama in the eyes of some of his Zionist critics. At any rate, it earned him political capital that he can bring to bear in his latest attempt at bringing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to a close.

As for Kerry, his credentials as a staunch supporter of Israel have been long established through his position as the veteran Chairman of the Foreign Relations committee and as a presidential candidate in 2004.

At the TV programme Meet the Press, Kerry was asked whether he supported Bush breaking with American policy when he said that Israel could keep some of the land occupied in the 1967 war and that the Palestinian refugees could not go back to their 1948 homes, Kerry said yes. (NBC News' Meet the Press, April 18, 2004).

At the same programme, Kerry was asked whether he supported Israeli policy of assassinating Palestinian leaders (Israel had just assassinated Hamas leader Abdul Aziz Rantisi). Again Kerry supported Israel's action and sought to justify it.

In other words, while American leaders are forever condemning Palestinian violence, they are forever justifying Israeli violence. And this in violation of international law and UN Security Council resolution 242 which reiterates the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territories by force.

And herein lies the principle reason for the litany of failures that characterise American peace mediation in the Middle East. It suffers from an irremediable contradiction: Claiming to be honest brokers when they are so inarguably and totally promoting the position and defending the interests of one of the parties.

If that remain the chief characteristic of the peace process, then there is no escaping the banalities and platitude of the suggestions and proposals put forward by the American mediators.

In a recent article in the New York Times Review Denis Ross reminded us why he holds the record of failed peace missions. His latest proposal for reviving the peace process contains such banalities as asking the Israelis to be ready to compensate settlers who agree to relocate to Israel. No mention of the occupation, no mention of the dispossession; no mention of international law. No wonder he came to be known as Israel's lawyer in Washington.

The occupation, the dispossession, and international law are not ornamental accessory to the peace process; they are its fundamental foundation.

If Obama and Kerry, who are going to Israel later this month, fail to recognise that reality, they would be abandoning the peace process to an ignominious death from its own contradictions.

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