

U.S. Revamps Its 'Muddle East' Policy

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Articles & Testimony

The foreign policy team of US President Barack Obama is undertaking a reassessment of its policy all over the Middle East, including Israel. No one has made or will make a public declaration about such a change, but a reassessment is nonetheless under way, and we can already detect the first products of this rethinking of policy.

The policy of keeping a distance from Israel, of picking fights with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, led nowhere. There was a nominal freeze of construction in the settlements. The settlement freeze was not important in the first place and Mr Obama has decided, as you could tell during his latest meeting with Netanyahu, not to make it the central issue anymore.

Instead, we are going to see a policy that emphasises co-operation with Israel, understanding of Israel, working together, hand in hand, to bring the Palestinians to direct negotiations with Israel, instead of what is now in place -- proximity talks. Nobody talks about anything serious in proximity talks; you don't show your cards to George Mitchell, the US mediator, as much as you may respect him.

They have reached the conclusion that keeping a distance from Israel, picking unnecessary fights with Israel, was not going to advance the peace process. They are not getting anything in return from the Arab world. This is why Rahm Emanuel, chief of staff to Obama, when he came to Israel recently on a private visit, a bar mitzvah for his son, said in so many words, "We screwed up".

There has also been a change of heart in Washington concerning Iran. I have solid information indicating that the top echelons of the administration -- National Security Council, Pentagon, State Department -- have reached the conclusion that the US cannot adopt the option of containing a nuclear Iran.

The option of accepting a nuclear Iran, unwillingly of course, and then trying to contain it, was advocated by many important players on the American foreign policy scene. This option is now apparently off the table.

There is a change of policy not only in terms of sanctions, both at the UN Security Council and those unilateral sanctions now imposed by both the US, the EU and others; but also an understanding by the administration that in no way can Iran be allowed to acquire a nuclear weapon.

How do we know this? Among other things, because this is what the Americans have been telling Arab leaders over recent weeks.

And why have they changed their minds? Because of what the leaders of the Gulf states, including the king of Saudi Arabia, have been saying to Obama for some time now; "We cannot live with a nuclear Iran."

This is something dramatic which also provides a basis for a new understanding with Israel. I make a caveat here -- the fact that the Americans have reached a conclusion that they will not allow Iran to go nuclear does not mean Mr Obama has to take a decision in half a year, a year, or even two.

They have time. There is a very big difference between having enough enriched uranium for two bombs, or in a few months for three bombs, and the capability to package highly enriched uranium into a nuclear warhead that can be

carried by a long-range, Shahab-3 missile, into the stratosphere, out of the stratosphere, and hit a target. The Iranians are not there.

So, of course, the effort to stop the Iranians should be taking place now, but we have to have a realistic view of the timeframe that we are discussing.

And finally, Iraq. In Iraq we had elections that constitute, in my humble opinion, a major victory to George W. Bush. The good guys won. The two main secular lists, Iyad Allawi's Iraqia, which is a Sunni-Shia alliance backed by Saudi Arabia, and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law list, both won in the elections. And when people at the National Security Council in Washington are looking at Iraq they are saying there is a huge opportunity there.

US troops have to start moving out, this year. But, suddenly, on Iraq, new music is played on the White House piano. They are saying, "The Americans may be out, but we need UN forces". That will consist of basically American soldiers. They do not want a government in Iraq that is going to be influenced, sponsored, coerced if you want, by the neighbouring Iranians, and will find a way to ensure this does not happen.

I believe Mr Obama and some of the people around him are reaching the conclusion a policy that is based on engagement, on "unclenching the fist", "let's talk", and especially, "let's talk to enemies", is probably a good campaign slogan.

But in the "Muddle East" region, where I come from, it doesn't really work. They got a no for an answer from the Syrians, they repeatedly get a no from the Iranians, they get slapped back all over the place. They are saying to themselves, "That's about as much as we are prepared to take."

Ehud Yaari is a Lafer International Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and Middle East Commentator for Channel 2 news in Israel. The above is based on a talk he gave in Melbourne on July 12. ❖

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