

## **Early Effort - Early Exit? The Obama Administration's Policy in the Middle East Conflict So Far**

*Lars Hänsel*

Ever since its first days in office the Obama administration has tried to decisively promote the Middle East peace process. Also in the Middle East, Obama has pursued his new paradigmatic approach to engagement. This stands in deliberate contrast to his presidential predecessor. Not least to strengthen this new course, Obama has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Still, these efforts in the Middle East have not yet yielded any positive results. The situation is at stalemate as rarely before. While under George W. Bush, Israelis and Palestinians were still at the negotiating table; this approach is now being questioned in principal. Essentially, the U.S. can now choose between two different courses of action: either renew and intensify their efforts, or scale back the intensity of their efforts. Taking a hands-off approach is no option – the Middle East conflict is far too important for the U.S. as well for that.

In his election campaign, Obama had not developed a far-reaching Middle East strategy. His contender at the time, Hillary Clinton, had criticized him for that by declaring that words were not enough to solve this conflict. Action based on experience in the region would be necessary, Clinton said. At first, Israelis assumed that in face of even more urgent domestic and economic issues as well as the crises in Afghanistan and the Iraq, the Middle East would lose significance. At the Herzliya Conference in February, Thomas Friedman addressed this issue as follows: "Obama has three priorities: banks, banks, banks – and none of them is the West Bank." Everyone in Israel therefore expected Obama to take a hesitant approach at first and not to come immediately to grips with the problems in the Middle East. It soon turned out, however, that Obama would act swiftly to produce tangible results.

An early indication of the significance of the Middle East conflict for the new Obama policy was the appointment of former U.S. Senator George J. Mitchell as the American special envoy to the Middle East. Mitchell was known as a "man of action", thanks especially to his persistence in the North Ireland conflict, which ended in a peace treaty.

In his speech at the Bar Ilan University, Benjamin Netanyahu first mentioned in public the creation of a demilitarized Palestinian State in accordance with the principles of the Oslo Accords and the Geneva Initiative. Yet Netanyahu did not succeed in quelling doubts that his agreeing to a Palestinian State was only the result of American pressure. Reactions in the Israeli public were especially sensitive when it became clear that Obama's offer of a dialogue

was valid for Iran as well. Here too Obama tried to replace confrontation with dialogue. Irritation grew when the U.S. began not only to criticize Israel's settlement policy but to demand a radical building freeze. Such a building freeze had already been stipulated in the Road Map but had never hindered negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. The principal of "natural growth", which had hitherto been accepted or rather silently tolerated by the U.S., was now abandoned, and a radical new approach was promoted. In Israel, the coalition between the Likud and right-wing parties allowed for no concessions in the settlement issue. In fact, the new Israeli government under Netanyahu – in contrast to those under his predecessors – had not authorized any renewed official settlement activities. On the other hand, a total freeze on settlement construction was not backed by the public at large. Netanyahu therefore offered to negotiate the future borders as soon as possible. The Palestinians clarified Abbas' position during his visit to Washington and made a total freeze an explicit condition for any further negotiations. The Palestinians thus turned the settlement issue from an item under negotiation into a barrier to negotiations. An early success for Obama was the handshake between Netanyahu and Abbas, which he mediated during the United Nations plenary session at the end of September 2009 in New York. A hoped-for renewal of negotiations was, however, not bound up with this.

Abbas' position was weakened by his unfortunate conduct following the publication of the Goldstone report, which investigated the military offensive of the Israeli army into the Gaza strip. Even under pressure from the U.S., Abbas made no immediate effort to have this report discussed by the UN Human Rights Council. Not only did this arouse direct criticism from Hamas, but it also led to growing resentment among the West Bank Palestinians. Representatives of his own Fatah party denied Abbas any further leadership role. During the military offensive, Abbas had allegedly made it clear to the Israeli government that he was interested in the complete military destruction of Hamas. Abbas' backing down and the discussion of the report at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva as well as the subsequent submission of the report to the United Nations General Assembly and the Security Council could not prevent lasting political damage.

This all culminated in Abbas' statement that the elections planned for 24 January 2010 would be postponed and that he himself would not stand for re-election. Since no candidates enjoy realistic chances of gaining a majority without Hamas, this could mean the end of the Palestinian National Authority that arose from the Oslo Accords. Abbas' withdrawal was, if nothing else, an affront to Obama. However, in the final analysis, it was the consequence of limited political room to maneuver which had shrunk even more as a result of his conduct in the settlement issue.

After ten months of intensive efforts on the part of Obama, the new policy has brought no discernible positive results in the Middle East. On the contrary, the current situation, in which substantive negotiations have receded into the distance, not only leads back to the state prior to the Annapolis conference but calls into question even the results of the Oslo process. The situation has not been so serious for some decades.

It presently seems as if there has been not a dialogue between Israel, the U.S. and the Palestinians, but rather a monologue of their respective representatives. It remains to be seen which of the two courses of actions the U.S. will decide to pursue. A hands-off approach is decidedly not an option, since the Middle East conflict is far too important even for the U.S. Basically, the U.S. could renew and intensify their efforts through a personal commitment on the part of the U.S. president going beyond the mere declamatory policy which has so far been pursued. On the other hand, the U.S. could scale down the intensity of their efforts and step back from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The failure in the settlement issue has cost Obama some of his credibility in Israel, the Arab states and among the Palestinians. Accordingly, the question has been raised in the region as to what the Obama administration can actually achieve if the settlement issue already poses an insurmountable barrier.

Whether disappointed hopes and fruitless steps will bring about a reorientation of the Obama administration and a restriction of its commitment in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains to be seen. In any case, one thing Obama cannot be blamed for: namely, that he failed to use his popularity, the new enthusiasm and a new oratory early in his presidency to make progress in the Middle East. So far, however, his immense political capital has yielded no returns.