

Will President Obama move to solve the Palestine-Israel conflict? Can he do it?

No international problem of modern times has been more studied, commented upon and disputed than the conflict between the Zionist movement and its Israeli successors, on the one hand and on the other, the Palestinian Muslim and Christian people. The conflict is embedded in deep historical memories, religious beliefs and great power struggles in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Hardly any contemporary issue anywhere in the world is not to some degree affected by it.

Can there be anything new to be said or done about it? If ever there was an issue that has played out the sequence of events predicted from the beginning, it was this one. The British statesman, Lord Curzon put it succinctly in Biblical terms when the creation of a Jewish Home was first discussed in the British Cabinet during the First World War. In response to the hope of one of his colleagues that Britain's plan would be welcomed by the inhabitants, he retorted dryly that he doubted that they would be content to be merely "hewers of wood and drawers of water" for the incoming Jewish settlers.

Britain did not credit Curzon's dictum. Its wartime strategic needs overcame all other concerns. Indeed, As Lord Balfour, the author of the founding document of what became Israel, the Balfour Declaration, wrote secretly to the Cabinet, "In short, so far as Palestine is concerned, the Powers [that is, Britain itself] have made no statement of fact which is not admittedly wrong, and no declaration of policy which, at least in letter, they have not always intended to violate."

And, in pursuit of their own objectives, increasing numbers of the Jewish people adopted their own myth. Driven by vicious anti-Semitism, first from Russia and then from other European countries, they saw the danger of extinction nearly realized in Nazi Germany. They did not consider rights of the native Palestinians any more than incoming American settlers had earlier considered those of the Native Americans. Indeed, one of the early fathers of Zionism, Israel Zangwill, coined a description of the Palestine issue that has permeated Zionism and Jewish thought ever since: Palestine was, he said, "The land without people for the people without land." Echoing that assessment more recently, Prime Minister Golda Meir famously said there weren't any Palestinians except for the Jews. If they existed at all, Palestinians were regarded as simply not comparable human beings.

But the three quarters of a million natives did not, of course, accept this definition of their status. Most were settled villagers whose lives, culture and social organization were rooted in the land. Their identification with land was almost mystical. The terrace walls of one's father, grandfather and great-grandfather, the fields in which one played as a child and in which one's ancestors were buried, the localities where saints have been venerated and besought, all these gave rise to emotions virtually impossible for Western urban (and virtually nomadic) man to fathom. Before their diaspora, villagers built their genealogies physically into the layout of their neighborhoods so that placement of dwellings corresponded to family trees. Consequently, they had not only the sort of feeling most Americans have about our homes, temporary as they are to many of us, but a more intense, more permanent, more "living" sense of relationship to the earth. Even in the cities, people recreated their villages as autonomous neighborhoods. Over the past sixty years, I have talked with scores of individuals who have described for me rooms, houses, gardens, orchards, streets as vividly as though they were seeing them at that moment. And, in retrospect and in the mind's eye of the refugees, these scenes have taken on a melancholy

longing that only loss can bring. The idea that these people did not love their land or were wandering gypsies for whom any place is as good as another is not only nonsense, but is, itself, since the Palestinians are Semites, an ugly variety of anti-Semitism.

For the Palestinians, from the beginning and with increasing intensity, the incoming Europeans were alien colonists intent on taking their land and destroying their society. They were right. Already in 1937, David Ben Gurion wrote, "we must expel the Arabs and take their places." His voice was not alone. Vladimir Jabotinsky, the father of "muscular Zionism" and the ideological mentor of Israeli prime ministers Begin, Shamir, Sharon and Netanyahu, told the 1936 British Royal Commission, which was trying to find a way to satisfy both Jews and Arabs, that the Zionists would never be satisfied with anything less than all of Palestine -- "We cannot. We never can. Should we swear to you we would be satisfied, it would be a lie."

Thus, conflict was inevitable from the beginning. The tragic story of a century of increasing danger, conflict and misery is well known. There are not and probably never were any obscurities. But what may be different now is that almost everyone agrees that the problem must somehow be solved. Indeed, even that sense of urgency is not new: the British, having been instrumental in creating the conflict, staked out already in 1936 what has always seemed to outsiders to be the essential element in a solution: dividing the land between the Jews and Palestinians. To the British, division seemed as sensible as the traditional saying, "half a loaf is better than no bread," but to both the Arabs and the Jews, partition seemed subversion of their nationhood. Undeterred, the British set up one commission after another to figure out how to accomplish it.

The British efforts were picked up after the Second World War by the newly established United Nations. But nothing anyone thought up made any sense: no matter how the little land was carved up, there were just too many natives and too few immigrants. The best effort proposed a Palestine with an Arab population of 725,000 and a Jewish population of 10,000 while the Jewish state would have 498,000 Jews and 407,000 Arabs. Jerusalem was to be internationalized and would contain 100,000 Jews and 105,000 Arabs. The Jewish state, which had all the best land, was estimated to have revenues about three times that of the Arab state, but with a higher birth rate, the Palestinian population would soon have been a majority even in the Jewish state.

That dilemma was solved by the expulsion of virtually all of the Palestinians in the 1948-1949 war.

Expulsion made Israel possible, but it did not create peace. So, one "solution" after another has been brought forward by American statesmen and their appointees. Some of their plans can be regarded as only bizarre, even jejune, but they are worth remembering to show how desperate has been the search for a solution and to get a measure of what President Obama would face if today he tried to reach a solution.

Almost everything has been proposed – dividing the waters of the River Jordan (so the states would not clash over that vital resource, the "Johnston plan"), aid programs to create a labor shortage (so the refugees could be absorbed elsewhere, the "Lilenthal Plan"), state-to-state negotiations (so as to by-pass the Palestinians, the Carter-Begin-Sadat "Camp David Negotiation"), honoring the right of return while making it unattractive (the "Johnson plan"). My favorite among the fantasies was the brainchild of that dour, normally practical

and certainly unemotional Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. He decided that since the Arabs and Israelis did not want to step on one another's territory but needed to go from the various parts of their own, the frontiers should be redrawn in the form of intersecting triangles meeting at a point – over which, presumably, each could jump, taking care not to bump into one another!

Meanwhile, paying no attention to these flights of fancy, the Israelis steadily took over the land and today have incorporated about 78% of the former British mandate. Additionally, they have effective control, with walls, fortresses, check points, garrisons and settlements over much of what the original UN decision designated as part of the Palestinian state. While the Israeli settlement policy is a direct violation of international law and is in defiance of a number of United Nations resolutions, Israel has created not only a physical presence – with about 650,000 settlers living on the West Bank -- but also a political position that would take great courage to dismantle.

Now, President Barack Obama has waded into the fray. So what is he trying to do and how serious is his effort?

We cannot read his mind, but what we know is that he has made a series of statements. As some of his critics have said, Obama will talk, even talk bravely as well as eloquently, but he will not act. Writing in *The New York Review of Books* this month, David Bromwich observed that throughout his public career, Obama “has a way of retreating into vagueness at just the point where clarity matters most...and has always preferred the symbolic authority of the grand utterance to the actual authority of a directed policy.” Others believe his inaction is politically shrewd: to win the next election he needs the votes and money of American supporters of the current Israeli government and its powerful lobby, AIPAC. And then there is the prospective charge of anti-Semitism.

American academics, journalists and politicians today fear the charge of anti-Semitism as acutely as they used to fear the charge of pro-Communism.

Not fearing that charge, Israelis evidently are more able to discuss America's relationship to Israel than are Americans. Reacting to the Congress' fawning and uncritical response to Benjamin Netanyahu's speech last week, the prominent Israeli statesman, former Knesset member and peace advocate, Uri Avnery, was revolted by the sight of “members of the highest legislative bodies of the world's only superpower, flying up and down like so many yo-yos, applauding wildly, every few minutes or seconds, the most outrageous lies and distortions of Benjamin Netanyahu...The most distressing part of it was that there was not a single lawmaker – Republican or Democrat – who dared to resist.” The blogger Mitchell Plitnick, chided that Congress, thoroughly beholden to AIPAC and completely indifferent to the best interest of not only the Palestinians but also Israel and their own country, cheered the home team as it defeated the President of the United States...The home team, in this case, was Netanyahu.” And, on the day after the speech, Ben Caspit of the Israeli newspaper *Maariv*, wrote that “Those who are scared of peace yesterday got their wish. Those who are scared of war will be a lot more scared today.’

The domestic American political reality, of which Obama is obviously aware, is that Israel is above political discussion. So, regardless of his obvious dislike of Netanyahu and his apparent belief that Israeli policies are not only wrong but dangerous to America, he promised that massive American economic and military aid – regardless of the state of the

American economy – will not only be continued but will be increased. So, it appears to me almost certain that Obama will not grasp the Palestine nettle.

Obviously, that is what Netanyahu also believes. So the Israeli response, from an advance copy of Obama's speech, was for Israeli Minister of Defense Ehud Barak to authorize the building of still more settlement housing. In a sense, this was a gratuitous act. Netanyahu/Barak did not need to snub or insult Obama. But, perhaps they felt that they needed to reaffirm the now traditional Israeli strategy -- their predecessors first explained it to me in the 1960s -- of building "facts on the ground." They have now done such a complete job of it that they want Obama to believe, and probably believe themselves, that no Israeli government can change the geography of settlement on the West Bank because Israel's settler population won't let it.

So, what will happen?

To move toward a prediction, I find it suggestive to compare Obama's position on Palestine today with French President Charles De Gaulle's position on Algeria in the 1950s and 1960s. While there are obvious differences, there are similarities that cast light on possible policies today, and perhaps tomorrow.

What is similar, of course, is that both men recognized that a situation had arisen that was dangerous to their countries. Obama has been told even by such different and opposing advisers as Secretary Hillary Clinton and General David Petraeus that the Palestine problem is the major cause of the terrorist threat to America. And therefore, that the Israeli refusal to move toward compromise peace settlement is against American national interests. Yet, the President is unwilling to risk moving to enforce a solution. So far, at least, he can afford inaction.

In terms of personality, Obama is no De Gaulle, but De Gaulle was not a determined leader until France came to the brink of civil war and to the edge of losing its civic culture. He saw that his regime risked being overthrown and perhaps himself be murdered if he did not act. Remember that Paris was then ringed by anti-aircraft cannon and De Gaulle feared an army putsch. So he went secretly off to Germany to assure himself of the army and the loyalty of the Paratroop leader General Jacques Massu before he moved. Then, once he made up his mind to get out and was sure of his military base, he sent the army -- with tanks, artillery and bombers -- into "European" Algiers to crush the opposition to his decision.

Simply put, the situation had become so grave that De Gaulle was forced to assert French national interest. Could any aspect of Israeli-American relations reach such a level?

Apparently not, because it did not when in 1967 the Israeli Navy and Air Force attacked and tried to sink an American naval vessel, hitting it with some 821 cannon shells, thousand pound bombs and napalm shells and firing five torpedoes. They killed 34 US Naval personnel and wounded 171 others. If President Lyndon Johnson did not then feel under severe pressure, it is understandable why President Obama does not feel under pressure from events and policies far less damaging to American security today.

However, he may feel about Netanyahu personally or the Israeli suppression of the Palestinian version of the Arab spring – which closely resembles what he so opposes in

Libya and Syria, firing into the ranks of peaceful demonstrators – he reverses President Teddy Roosevelt’s dictum by talking eloquently but carrying a small stick.

While I presume Obama believes that America has a compelling national interest in bringing about negotiations, Israel is determined not to heed his warnings. Indeed, Netanyahu and his Likhudniks have given the settlers -- Israel’s version of De Gaulle’s enemies, the *Pieds-noirs* of Algeria – a veto on negotiations. They have now created an iron wall of "facts on the ground" that they believe Moses himself could not have moved. Thus, Obama on May 13 accepted the resignation of his negotiator, Senator George Mitchell and apparently does not intend to appoint a successor.

Viewing these events, Netanyahu felt strong enough to throw down the gauntlet to Obama, daring him to pick it up – his timing is perfect, his supporters are lined up, his critics in America are scattered and unable to reach a mass audience. It will take, I believe, some really catastrophic event to change the parameters. A speech will not do it.

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