

## ***The US and Israel in the Face of Regional Challenges***

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The status of the American economy in the twenty-first century will significantly affect the global security challenges both in the long and short terms. In the long term, the status of the United States on the international arena relative to other players as well as its comprehensive security approach to the new security challenges will be affected by its global economic status. In the short term, American policy and politics will be influenced by the rate of economic recovery and the ability to prevent terror on American soil. At the same time, priority will be given to an orderly exit from Iraq and successes in Afghanistan, two arenas where Iran has potential significant clout. The policy of engagement or crippling sanctions vis-à-vis Iran will be brought to the test.

Alongside difficult domestic initiatives, the American administration will have to address some equally complex challenges in formulating its foreign policy. Both the internal and the foreign policy issues present questions relating to President Obama. Obama has not succeeded in erasing the question marks surrounding his ideological base, and many people in the United States still do not know whether to categorize him as a liberal ideologue in the guise of a centrist or as someone with a centrist stand who has nonetheless managed to engage the support of the American left. It seems that the president's decision to add forces in Afghanistan and his address upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize are prompting the media to cast Obama in the role of the political centrist, but the jury is still out.

While there are those who claim that the steps that might indicate the centrist line of the administration are merely the result of political

considerations and constraints, others say that Obama never left the center. According to them, all the moves we saw in 2009 reflected a shrewd strategy designed to give the administration public and international power and allow the administration to continue to lead America towards the center. In any case, in 2010 many question marks may be lifted and we may be able to determine with greater certainty the direction that President Obama is pursuing.

In recent weeks many sources quoted by the American media noted that the biggest test of Obama's foreign policy is the Iranian issue. I believe this understanding is congruent with Israel's own interests. Israel has a serious interest in seeing that Obama's test includes not only the policy he will implement in Afghanistan but also and especially the way in which the administration will tackle the Iranian challenge.

It should be possible to determine very soon if the effort to enlist Russia and China in exerting pressure on Iran has been fruitful. If the administration fails to lead an effective campaign to isolate Iran economically and internationally, it is likely to find itself facing Middle Eastern players who have lost their patience. This could on the one hand be Israel, and on the other, it could take the form of Arab states seeking in practice to attain nuclear capability. Alongside the strategic threat Iran poses to the United States, both the possibility that Israel would take military action and the possibility that Arab states would begin a nuclear arms race are causing the administration to lose sleep.

In everything concerning the peace process, neither the Israelis nor the Americans have distinguished themselves in 2009 in terms of their attitude to the political process between Israel and the Palestinians. The American desire to create a better process than the one that was in place, reflecting the desire to conduct a policy that was "anything but Bush," contributed to the fact that today there is no political process at all. Israel, wanting to retreat from the two-state principle – even if this was merely a tactical retreat – and from compromising on the notion of a sequential process, found itself committed to two states and willing today to discuss the permanent settlement at the first stage.

These processes have not earned Israel international support and to an extent have increased its isolation. Today Israel faces the risk of a renewed outbreak of violence and uncertainty with regard to what may occur in the

Palestinian Authority. Furthermore, there is a danger that at the end of the ten month construction freeze in the West Bank Jewish settlements, the Israeli government will find itself caught between contradictory and severe external and internal pressures.

The best interests of both Israel and the United States point to the need to take the following steps: first, invest every effort to prevent the outbreak of violence; second, continue the process of building Palestinian institutions and improving the quality of life of the Palestinian population. At the moment, this is the only move all sides are agreed on and it is a vital one for preserving the gap between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Likewise, we must not be lured into making moves that may put wind in Hamas' sails. Third, efforts must be made to renew the negotiations between the sides. Considering the circumstances that have been created, secret negotiations are the only way likely to be useful. The chance that both sides would be able to discuss the high costs and somehow bridge the gaps in a public process is small. Therefore, if at all possible, we should go the route of secret negotiations.

Alongside these steps, Israel must, together with the United States, come up with alternatives to a negotiated agreement, in case it is impossible to conduct successful secret negotiations with the Palestinians. It must also consider the possibility of conducting negotiations in tandem with Syria.

Two final comments: first, the Iranian issue will remain on the American and Israeli agenda in 2010 and perhaps even in 2011, meaning that in the two years to come the American-Israeli relationship will be affected by the Iranian problem. Second, if there is no progress between Israel and the Palestinians in 2010, then towards 2011, we may see a growing inclination to "save the parties from themselves" and push them to act upon their own perceived "true" interests.

In closing, Obama, to an extent, remains a mystery. What is the genetic code, the most inner compass, guiding this president? He may have given us at least one clue during 2009, in his refusal to change his strategic course as he declined to seize the opportunity of the Green Revolution in Iran. However, much remains unknown and may stay so, unless a major sudden crisis forces the president to reveal his inner compass to the public.