

# **Memorandum to the Prime Minister**

## ***Outline for the initial meeting between President Barack Obama and the incoming Israeli prime minister***

**Oded Eran**

### **Introduction**

Barack Obama's declarations as a presidential candidate about the Middle East were fairly general and left many questions unanswered. These declarations, however, should be viewed through the prism of experience, which suggests that statements by American presidential candidates during their campaigns are simply meant to ensure them support from certain segments of the American public. When a candidate becomes the duly elected president, his policy is affected by many varied considerations that were likely not a part of his thinking before entering the White House.

A common assumption among the many trying to guess how President Obama will conduct himself with regard to the Middle East is that the global financial crisis, an American withdrawal from Iraq, and other international challenges will take up a great deal of his time, so that he will allot only limited attention to the Arab-Israeli conflict in general and the Israeli-Palestinian issue in particular. Nonetheless,

Dr. Oded Eran, director of INSS

The Institute for National Security Studies convened a number of Israeli experts to draft an agenda for the new Israeli prime minister upon the first, critical meeting he or she will have with the American president. The panel of experts included Prof. Itamar Rabinowitz, Maj. Gen. (ret.) Giora Eiland, Mr. Aluf Benn, Mr. Dan Halperin, Dr. Eran Lerman, Dr. Nimrod Novik, Mr. Zvi Rafiah, Dr. Roni Bart, and the author. Some of members of the panel served at the Israeli embassy in Washington at different times. This article is based on their contribution.

it is hard to assume that President Obama will be able to ignore the criticism leveled against his two predecessors, Presidents Clinton and Bush, whereby they left any substantive work on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the last months of their tenures. Confronting end-of-term time pressures, they tried to attain, primarily through two summit meetings – Camp David in 2000 and Annapolis in 2007 – more than the two principal partners in the conflict were capable of giving. It is significant, therefore, that on January 21, 2009, his first full day in office, President Obama called the chairman of the Palestinian Authority and the prime minister of Israel, signaling that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict figures high on his agenda.

President Obama will not be able to ignore the failures of previous attempts – from the Oslo accords to the Annapolis agreement – to promote an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, and he will have to decide how much time and energy he will devote to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition, he will have to determine the proportion between investment in this issue and efforts channeled toward the Israeli-Syrian track, and whether there are alternatives to the suggested solutions that have not borne fruit along the Israeli-Palestinian track.

The Israeli government to be established after the coming elections must not assume that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will fall relatively low on the agenda of the new American administration. At the same time, this government will have an agenda of its own, and will have to convince the new administration in Washington of the inner logic of Israel's priorities.

### **President Obama's Agenda**

The agenda of the new president of the United States will include the following major priorities:

- Long term ramifications of the global financial crisis
- Rehabilitation and stabilization of relations with Russia and China
- Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (North Korea, Pakistan, Iran)
- Iraq
- Afghanistan, and relations between Pakistan and India
- Regional issues such as the Middle East and Latin America
- Global terrorism

To these known issues confronting the Obama administration one must add unforeseen crises, such as natural disasters of great magnitude, energy or fuel price crises, or mega-scale terrorist attacks. Almost every topic is in some manner linked to Israel, and hence the significance of a meeting between the American and Israeli leaders during the first phase of the Obama administration.

## General Message

In the past, tension arose between Israel and the United States when the two countries surprised one another and operated alone on specific issues, without notifying the other, or when the expectations of one side were not commensurate with the ability of the other side to meet them. Therefore, it is important that Israel express its desire to continue to strengthen mutual coordination with the United States, based on reciprocal, systemic, and personal trust between the leaders in order to prevent surprises on both sides.

The international arena is at an historical crossroads, and both the United States and Israel face challenges and changes with long term implications for their vital interests. In Israel's case, these are also existential interests, and hence the very limited room for error as well as the need for maximum coordination and prevention of surprises between it and the United States.

## Iran

Israel must emphasize to the United States that the issue of Iran is urgent and of supreme importance and that it overshadows other concerns, and clarify that Israel cannot accept a nuclear-empowered Iran. Iran involves virtually every other core issue of the Middle East, in particular the stability of the various regimes in the region.

The preferred method for solving the Iranian issue is by using non-aggressive, non-military means while retaining the formula of "all options are on the table." Israel wants and needs to give diplomacy a chance on this question, though the window of opportunity is closing, as late 2009 would seem

The prime minister must stress that Israel clearly understands the link between rebuilding the status of the United States in the Middle East and the scope of its involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict resolution.

to be the last opportunity for this recourse. Therefore, it is also necessary to maintain the credibility of the military option.

This is the time to underscore again the critical importance of Israel and the United States avoiding mutual surprises, especially surprises related to a military option as well as the possible (albeit unlikely) American willingness to draw an equation of “Dimona in exchange for Natanz” as part of American negotiations with Iran. Israel should request to be informed ahead of time of America’s planned steps, be they bilateral with Iran or multilateral. Thus a mechanism consisting of liaison officers who will coordinate the Iranian issue between the two countries should be established. These liaison officers may be military personnel or civilians, as per the decision of the two nations.

The potential success of sanctions to dissuade Iran from continuing its nuclear program is a function of the sanctions’ severity and intensity. As long as the Security Council does not approve harsher sanctions than those it has already imposed on Iran, it is difficult to envision the current sanctions yielding the desired results. Harsher Security Council sanctions essentially depend on agreement by Russia (and China); hence the importance of an American-Russian dialogue, critical for a number of issues, including Iran. Russian cooperation will make it possible to minimize Iran’s freedom of movement in both the nuclear realm and terrorism.

President Obama has already clarified that he is willing to engage in dialogue with Iran. The Israeli prime minister must make it clear that Israel is not opposed to such a dialogue if it can result in removing the Iranian nuclear threat, yet it urges the following conditions: a time limit, since the Iranians have always exploited every negotiation to continue their nuclear development; an Iranian commitment, even if not public and ostensibly free of international pressure, to suspend its nuclear activity; and a clarification to Iran what the ramifications would be for the failure of such a dialogue. If and when the US dialogue with Iran takes place, it is strongly recommended that it deal with Iran’s support for sub-state terror organizations and destabilizing efforts in the region.

## Political Steps with Regard to the Palestinians and Syria

It is important that the Israeli prime minister tell the new president at their first meeting that Israel views progress on both tracks – the Israeli-Palestinian and the Israeli-Syrian – as of great importance, and in order to further such progress, it is interested in active American involvement. The prime minister must stress that Israel clearly understands the link between rebuilding the status of the United States in the Middle East and the scope of its involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict resolution.

The prime minister should suggest to the president that before any attempt is made to renew efforts on the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian tracks, Israel and the United States commit to undertake a thorough review of all the issues and the possible areas for maneuver. Both should clarify their red lines; evaluate the probability of success; and decide on a timetable for meeting the objectives.

Should Israel decide it is ready to proceed simultaneously on the two tracks, the prime minister will be able to make positive reference to the Arab initiative of 2002 in the meeting with President Obama, while emphasizing that this cannot serve as a substitute for negotiations or be a recipe for Arab passivity in whatever has to do with promoting relations with Israel before agreements are reached.

It is preferable that at the first meeting with President Obama, the Israeli prime minister also clarify that a complete return to the pre-Six Day War borders was never an American demand, and that the changes that have occurred on the ground since 1967 require flexibility on this issue from the Arabs as well. (For example, before 1967 there was no direct passage from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank through Israel. Mere compliance with the demand to return to the June 4, 1967 lines will leave the West Bank and Gaza Strip separated.) The next prime minister must also make it clear that the question of Palestinian refugees cannot be solved by the formula contained in the Arab initiative, though it already represents some progress towards an acceptable possible solution. The new American administration should be asked to focus on encouraging the positive

Operation Cast Lead stressed once again Israel's need for American aid, both for curbing negative political initiatives and for responding to political and security needs.

approach that the Arab initiative embodies, but to avoid sweeping and unreserved support for its contents.

### **The Palestinian Track**

Thus far the Palestinian track has experienced three major failures to reach a solution: the 1993 Oslo accords, the second, 2000, Camp David agreement, and the 2007 Annapolis process. Every additional failure will carry a heavy price tag. Nonetheless, it is vital to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and it is clear that Israel and the United States cannot be seen as neglecting the subject or indifferent to the results of political gridlock in this area.

The failures of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations thus far require the parties to craft a new framework that will increase the prospects for success. To this end, it is necessary to undertake a joint Israeli-American examination of what underlay the previous failures. The framework to be chosen must be based on the principles of the Roadmap, i.e., a two-state solution. At the same time, Israel must declare, even if at this stage in general terms only, that it is willing to make additional efforts towards an immediate improvement of economic conditions in the West Bank. This declaration must specify willingness to take a number of steps, especially easing movement within the area and the traffic of goods and people between Israel and the territories.

In this context, though also in the bilateral Israeli-American context, it is important that in the first meeting with the new American president, the prime minister reaffirm Israel's determination to meet the obligations it assumed in the April 14, 2004 letter to the United States regarding the unauthorized outposts. Such an Israeli statement is necessary in order to spur the new administration to embrace the pledges by President Bush to Prime Minister Sharon in his letter of the same date regarding the results of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. The Israeli prime minister will be able to clarify to President Obama the political difficulties in implementing the Israeli 2004 commitment, but it is vital that the prime minister say, without prompting from the other side, that despite these difficulties it remains a binding Israeli commitment.

On the subject of Hamas, it is urged that the Israeli prime minister tell the American president that Israel will not get involved in the

internal struggle between Hamas and Fatah, though it has a clear interest in Fatah emerging as the victor, and it is willing to work towards strengthening Mahmoud Abbas. At the same time, the concern about Hamas seizing control of the West Bank in the future already requires all the international actors in the Middle East to coordinate policy, and therefore the prime minister must suggest to the president immediate Israeli-American coordination on this subject.

It should be understood that even without a change in the situation in the West Bank, a period of calm in the Gaza Strip and especially the possible release of the soldier Gilad Shalit will weaken the resolve among the Western nations that conditioned dialogue with Hamas on the organization's acceptance of the Quartet's three prerequisites. Moreover, certain political developments may force even Israel or the United States to veer away from its present policy regarding Hamas. Therefore, early dialogue and coordination between Israel and the United States are a must on this issue in order to prevent unforeseen unilateral moves, such as the surprise the United States gave Israel in 1988 when it decided to launch a dialogue with the PLO.

In light of the possibility that the new ceasefire regimen between Hamas and Israel will be violated by Hamas, it is critical to make it clear to the new American president that Israel wants to avoid any accumulation of provocations from the Gaza Strip to the point that will require Israel to undertake a wide-scope military operation. Therefore, it should be stressed, Israel might frequently respond to such violations with military means as part of an overall aim of deterring Hamas and because of an unwillingness to be drawn into a situation in which extreme responses again cause civilian casualties.

### **The Syrian Track**

The Israeli prime minister must demonstrate to the new president Israel's willingness to see the United States involved in an Israeli-Syrian diplomatic process. President Bashar al-Asad has publicly spoken of his desire to have the United States involved in such discussions, and there is no point in Israel being seen as lagging behind. In fact, the prime minister should convey to President Obama that the United States and Israel must act jointly on this issue, in part to avoid damage to their relations with Turkey, which served as mediator in the early talks held

between Israel and Syria. Of course, it is necessary to urge the president to avoid committing himself to the role of brokering Israeli-Syrian negotiations without receiving something from Syria in exchange.

Of even greater importance is the coordination between the United States and Israel on the question of how to handle the Iranian issue in the context of Israeli-Syrian negotiations, i.e., demands of Syria regarding its bilateral relations with Iran, including demands regarding its role as a conduit of Iranian arms to Hizbollah in Lebanon. Another issue in the Israeli-Syrian context is the need to ensure that Syria does in fact fulfill the commitments it will make in negotiations with Israel over a settlement. Here too Israel is interested in a dialogue between the United States and Russia and in comprehensive understandings between them.

### **Lebanon and Hizbollah**

The problem of Lebanon and in particular the challenge Hizbollah represents must be among the main topics raised in the first meeting between the Israeli prime minister and the new American president. It is of the utmost importance that both Hizbollah's growing military buildup and the organization's heightened status within internal Lebanese politics, which grants it official legitimacy to increase its military strength without any interference, be presented clearly. In this context, it is also important to present squarely the limits of Security Council Resolution 1701 and the failures of its implementation. President Obama must be made aware that despite Israel's desire to allow the Lebanese government to devise for itself a status independent of Syria, Hizbollah behavior's is liable to result in a renewed military confrontation with the organization. Such a confrontation might have even more severe ramifications than in 2006, and Israel cannot commit itself to limiting its moves to inflicting harm only on Hizbollah, its infrastructures, and its fighters.

### **Bilateral Relations**

In the first meeting with the new American president, the Israeli prime minister must avoid using clichés about the importance and the depth of their countries' bilateral relations, but should stress several points:



1. Israel understands clearly the need for historical moves that would rebuild and significantly strengthen the status of the United States in the Middle East. Israel is prepared to contribute to such moves. The peace process itself has great potential from this perspective as well.
2. Israel also understands clearly the ramifications for the American economy of the economic crisis and the aid packages approved by the outgoing administration.
3. Israel is not asking for additional aid at this time beyond that mandated by the outgoing administration and approved by the previous Congress. At the same time, possible settlements on the Palestinian and Syrian tracks will have long term security budget implications. Israel will then ask that the administration be understanding of its requests. It would be welcome were President Obama to declare after his meeting with the Israeli prime minister that the United States will continue to ensure that American resources help Israel defend itself.
4. American policy and initiatives in other areas on the international arena have many implications for Israel, some of which are immediate. From time to time, there is a clash between American moves and Israel's interests, for example in terms of defense exports. Israel suggests holding a joint and comprehensive discussion on this issue that covers both political as well as commercial aspects in order to prevent future misunderstandings and tensions.
5. Existing security and strategic coordinating mechanisms between the United States and Israel have lost their influence and become somewhat rusty. Israel suggests holding a joint discussion between the two countries on how to streamline these mechanisms (including the ones suggested in this document) and to unite them under a common umbrella.

## Conclusion

While Operation Cast Lead emphasized Israel's military might, it also underscored the country's soft underbelly in terms of its international standing. The operation stressed once again Israel's need for American aid, both for curbing negative political initiatives, and for responding to political and security needs such as the memorandum of understanding

regarding combating arms smuggling to Hamas. The Iranian nuclear issue also emphasizes the need for Israel to take the American factor and the needs of President Obama's incoming administration into account when weighing its own considerations.

The global economic crisis in all its dimensions poses both difficult challenges and opportunities for Israel. Israel will be required to formulate a creative and proactive approach vis-à-vis the new administration in Washington that will seek to rebuild America's international status, particularly in the Middle East. Israel will also be required to reexamine the agreements that were viable under the previous administration and that will almost certainly prove to be outdated in the Obama era.

Every meeting between an Israeli prime minister and the president of the United States is important in terms of securing Israel's interests and promoting mutual understanding between the two nations. When two figures meet for the first time in their new positions, the meeting is fraught with even greater significance. In this first meeting, the pattern of the relationship between the two is established, and their agendas and priorities as leaders of their respective governments are clarified.