

10 June 2008

Obama and Israel: No, I Can't!

By Uri Avnery



Obama's declarations at the AIPAC conference are very, very bad for peace.

After months of a tough and bitter race, a merciless struggle, Barack Obama has defeated his formidable opponent, Hillary Clinton. He has wrought a miracle: for the first time in history a black person has become a credible candidate for the presidency of the most powerful country in the world.

And what was the first thing he did after his astounding victory? He ran to the conference of the Israel lobby, AIPAC, and made a speech that broke all records for obsequiousness and fawning.

That is shocking enough. Even more shocking is the fact that nobody was shocked.

It was a triumphalist conference. Even this powerful organization had never seen anything like it. 7000 Jewish functionaries from all over the United States came together to accept the obeisance of the entire Washington elite, which came to kowtow at their feet. All the three presidential hopefuls made speeches, trying to outdo each other in flattery. 300 Senators and Members of Congress crowded the hallways. Everybody who wants to be elected or reelected to any office, indeed everybody who has any political ambitions at all, came to see and be seen.

The Washington of AIPAC is like the Constantinople of the Byzantine emperors in its heyday.

The world looked on and was filled with wonderment. The Israeli media were ecstatic. In all the world's capitals the events were followed closely and conclusions were drawn. All the Arab media reported on them extensively. Aljazeera devoted an hour to a discussion of the phenomenon.

The most extreme conclusions of professors John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt were confirmed in their entirety. On the eve of their visit to Israel, this coming Thursday, the Israel Lobby stood at the center of political life in the US and the world at large.

Why, actually? Why do the candidates for the American presidency believe that the Israel lobby is so absolutely essential to their being elected?

The Jewish votes are important, of course, especially in several swing states which may decide the outcome. But African-Americans have more votes, and so do the Hispanics. Obama has brought to the political scene millions of new young voters. Numerically, the Arab-Muslim community in the US is also not an insignificant factor.

Some say that Jewish money speaks. The Jews are rich. Perhaps they donate more than others for political causes. But the myth about all-powerful Jewish money has an anti-Semitic ring. After all, other lobbies, and most decidedly the huge multinational corporations, have given considerable sums of money to Obama (as well as to his opponents). And Obama

himself has proudly announced that hundreds of thousands of ordinary citizens have sent him small donations, which have amounted to tens of millions.

True, it has been proven that the Jewish lobby can almost always block the election of a senator or a member of Congress who does not dance - and do so with fervor - to the Israeli tune. In some exemplary cases (which were indeed meant to be seen as examples) the lobby has defeated popular politicians by lending its political and financial clout to the election campaign of a practically unknown rival.

But in a presidential race?

The transparent fawning of Obama on the Israel lobby stands out more than similar efforts by the other candidates.

Why? Because his dizzying success in the primaries was entirely due to his promise to bring about a change, to put an end to the rotten practices of Washington and to replace the old cynics with a young, brave person who does not compromise his principles.

And lo and behold, the very first thing he does after securing the nomination of his party is to compromise his principles. And how!

The outstanding thing that distinguishes him from both Hillary Clinton and John McCain is his uncompromising opposition to the war in Iraq from the very first moment. That was courageous. That was unpopular. That was totally opposed to the Israel lobby, all of whose branches were fervidly pushing George Bush to start the war that freed Israel from a hostile regime.

And here comes Obama to crawl in the dust at the feet of AIPAC and go out of his way to justify a policy that completely negates his own ideas.

OK he promises to safeguard Israel's security at any cost. That is usual. OK he threatens darkly against Iran, even though he promised to meet their leaders and settle all problems peacefully. OK he promised to bring back our three captured soldiers (believing, mistakenly, that all three are held by Hizbullah - an error that shows, by the way, how sketchy is his knowledge of our affairs.)

But his declaration about Jerusalem breaks all bounds. It is no exaggeration to call it scandalous.

No Palestinian, no Arab, no Muslim will make peace with Israel if the Haram-al-Sharif compound (also called the Temple Mount), one of the three holiest places of Islam and the most outstanding symbol of Palestinian nationalism, is not transferred to Palestinian sovereignty. That is one of the core issues of the conflict.

On that very issue, the Camp David conference of 2000 broke up, even though the then Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, was willing to divide Jerusalem in some manner.

Along comes Obama and retrieves from the junkyard the outworn slogan "Undivided Jerusalem, the Capital of Israel for all Eternity". Since Camp David, all Israeli governments have understood that this mantra constitutes an insurmountable obstacle to any peace process. It has disappeared - quietly, almost secretly - from the arsenal of official slogans.

Only the Israeli (and American-Jewish) Right sticks to it, and for the same reason: to smother at birth any chance for a peace that would necessitate the dismantling of the settlements.

In prior US presidential races, the pandering candidates thought that it was enough to promise that the US embassy would be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. After being elected, not one of the candidates ever did anything about this promise. All were persuaded by the State Department that it would harm basic American interests.

Obama went much further. Quite possibly, this was only lip service and he was telling himself: OK, I must say this in order to get elected. After that, God is great.

But even so the fact cannot be ignored: the fear of AIPAC is so terrible, that even this candidate, who promises change in all matters, does not dare. In this matter he accepts the worst old-style Washington routine. He is prepared to sacrifice the most basic American interests. After all, the US has a vital interest in achieving an Israeli-Palestinian peace that will allow it to find ways to the hearts of the Arab masses from Iraq to Morocco. Obama has harmed his image in the Muslim world and mortgaged his future - if and when he is elected president.

Sixty five years ago, American Jewry stood by helplessly while Nazi Germany exterminated their brothers and sisters in Europe. They were unable to prevail on President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to do anything significant to stop the Holocaust. (And at that same time, many Afro-Americans did not dare to go near the polling stations for fear of dogs being set on them.)

What has caused the dizzying ascent to power of the American Jewish establishment? Organizational talent? Money? Climbing the social ladder? Shame for their lack of zeal during the Holocaust?

The more I think about this wondrous phenomenon, the stronger becomes my conviction (about which I have already written in the past) that what really matters is the similarity between the American enterprise and the Zionist one, both in the spiritual and the practical sphere. Israel is a small America, the USA is a huge Israel.

The Mayflower passengers, much as the Zionists of the first and second aliya (immigration wave), fled from Europe, carrying in their hearts a messianic vision, either religious or utopian. (True, the early Zionists were mostly atheists, but religious traditions had a powerful influence on their vision.) The founders of American society were "pilgrims", the Zionists immigrants called themselves "olim" - short for olim beregel, pilgrims. Both sailed to a "promised land", believing themselves to be God's chosen people.

Both suffered a great deal in their new country. Both saw themselves as "pioneers", who make the wilderness bloom, a "people without land in a land without people". Both completely ignored the rights of the indigenous people, whom they considered sub-human savages and murderers. Both saw the natural resistance of the local peoples as evidence of their innate murderous character, which justified even the worst atrocities. Both expelled the natives and took possession of their land as the most natural thing to do, settling on every hill and under every tree, with one hand on the plow and the Bible in the other.

True, Israel did not commit anything approaching the genocide performed against the Native Americans, nor anything like the slavery that persisted for many generations in the US. But since the Americans have repressed these atrocities in their consciousness, there is nothing to

prevent them from comparing themselves to the Israelis. It seems that in the unconscious mind of both nations there is a ferment of suppressed guilt feelings that express themselves in the denial of their past misdeeds, in aggressiveness and the worship of power.

How is it that a man like Obama, the son of an African father, identifies so completely with the actions of former generations of American whites? It shows again the power of a myth to become rooted in the consciousness of a person, so that he identifies 100% with the imagined national narrative. To this may be added the unconscious urge to belong to the victors, if possible.

Therefore, I do not accept without reservation the speculation: "Well, he must talk like this in order to get elected. Once in the White House, he will return to himself."

I am not so sure about that. It may well turn out that these things have a surprisingly strong hold on his mental world.

Of one thing I am certain: Obama's declarations at the AIPAC conference are very, very bad for peace. And what is bad for peace is bad for Israel, bad for the world and bad for the Palestinian people.

If he sticks to them, once elected, he will be obliged to say, as far as peace between the two peoples of this country is concerned: "No, I can't!"

-Uri Avnery is an Israeli writer and peace activist with Gush Shalom. He contributed this article to PalestineChronicle.com.