

Obama must push Israel toward a two-state solution

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By Sam Jadallah

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Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak has thrown down the gauntlet to "totally change the rules of the game" in Gaza. By killing 230 Palestinians on his first day, he certainly did change the rules. The Israeli military set a new low in its callous disregard for the lives of Palestinians it has subjugated for 60 years.

But the emerging question is whether President-elect Barack Obama will also prove to be a game changer. Will he break with decades of American presidents who have indulged Israel's dominion over the Palestinians? Thus far, Obama himself has not offered up the customary American obeisance to Israel's self-described security needs.

Israel's war crimes must not be condoned if he hopes to have any chance of effecting a peace deal as a tough-minded mediator. Nor should the American public be misled into thinking this is a war against Hamas. Israeli officials used the same talking points in 2002 when they destroyed the Palestinian Authority infrastructure in the West Bank. Israel gets to avoid negotiations toward a peace based on two states when it escalates conflict and impairs the Palestinian ability to self-govern.

Hamas agreed in 2006 to accept negotiations led by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas toward a final status agreement based on the June 4, 1967 lines, indicating its acceptance of the two-state solution. And in 2008, Hamas' political bureau head, Khaled Meshaal, reiterated his commitment to that agreement.

This is a war against Palestinians — approximately half of whom in Gaza are under age 16. A visit to one of Gaza's hospitals curdles the blood of even the most experienced human rights advocates. My friends in Gaza tell me that walking the hospital halls is an unbearable agony. They lack medicine, equipment, electricity and the infrastructure necessary to treat the hundreds of injured Palestinians.

No American would tolerate the devastation they have endured since Dec. 27; nor would they accept the cruel siege of the last 18 months or the lack of equal rights or freedom for the past decades.

Yet the conundrum can be solved if Israel realizes that its long-term security is based on Palestinians' right to live free and have equal rights. For 60 years Palestinians have rejected servitude with nonviolent resistance, grass-roots mobilization and, some, with violence. While violence is always abhorrent and should be condemned, there is sadly no surprise in this. People everywhere resist foreign domination.

This is where Obama can make break with decades of failed American policy. Change is undoubtedly why Americans elected Obama. Surveying eight years of total failure

under Bush in the Middle East, the American public presumably recognized new thinking is desperately required.

Obama has a narrow window in which to deliver. All eyes in the region are on him — and the American-made F-16s terrorizing Palestinian civilians. He must display the fortitude necessary to stand up to an ally and the Israel lobby. Obama must assert in an authentic American voice that the U.S. backs Palestinian freedom and will not tolerate Israel's expansionist West Bank ambitions that sabotage any prospect of a viable Palestinian state.

Palestinians may soon recognize that an independent state is no longer a realistic possibility among all the settlements and bypass roads Israel has illegally constructed. If so, Israel may yet regret its failure to accept the eminently fair Arab Peace Initiative — full peace by 22 neighboring countries in return for a Palestinian state based on international principles.

Some day soon, Palestinians may move on to insist, like black South Africans, on equal rights in one state. And like black South Africans, the numbers and fundamental principles of justice will be on their side.

The Obama administration will have the last shot at a two-state solution. This cannot wait.

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As Obama is sworn in, Israelis and Palestinians will be thinking 'no we can't'

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1056944.html>

By Akiva Eldar

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The swearing-in of Barack Obama as 44th president of the United States takes me back to another presidential ceremony, one that moved millions of people, especially Israelis and Palestinians, whose war-torn hearts were filled with hope for better days. The ceremony on the lawn of the White House more than 15 years ago was my first assignment as Haaretz correspondent to Washington. The beads of perspiration mixed with tears when, with an embarrassed look, prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, briefly hesitating, shook the hand of Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasser Arafat. President Bill Clinton, who had arrived at the White House less than nine months before the signing of the Oslo Accords, looked on with a face that glowed with joy and satisfaction.

Clinton shone onto the Middle Eastern skies at a time when the Israeli right, headed by Yitzhak Shamir, had sunk deep into the opposition, giving way to the "peace camp." Less than 16 years

later, a leader of the same rightist camp is making a political comeback on the ruins of the homes of hundreds of dead Palestinian children. According to the polls, Benjamin Netanyahu is likely to be the first Israeli to meet Obama in the White House. During Netanyahu's first term in office, in 1996-99, his neo-conservative worldview led him to clash with the previous Democratic president. That occurred as Clinton's ambition to push forth the Oslo process met Netanyahu's ambition to bring it to an end.

Obama is surrounded by Jewish advisers who are very familiar with Israeli tricks and stalling tactics, especially when it comes to the settlements (have we mentioned "natural growth" yet?), but they would still want the new president to adopt the tradition of the "special relationship" with the Jewish state. Obama, however, has also been exposed to the school of thought, existing in both the administration and the American think tanks, that argues that the excessive closeness between the U.S. and Israel undermines America's strategic interests in the Arab world.

Brent Scowcroft, one of the shapers of foreign policy under President George H.W. Bush, and according to Time magazine, a strong influence on Obama, has called for a fundamental restructuring of American policy in the Middle East. Scowcroft, who was the boss of the current (and incoming) defense secretary Robert Gates, and a friend of the new national security adviser, James Jones, is proposing that the "special relationship" be adjusted to a "natural relationship." Perhaps such a change would be able to transform celebratory ceremonies into dry agreements.

The signing of the Oslo Accords, in September 1993, was the last time that I had the feeling of "yes we can." I believed that the new government in Jerusalem and the new administration in Washington could, together, bring about a great change. Israelis and Palestinians believed that with the help of an American president who evaded the draft, they would be able to achieve peace. Rabin was murdered by a Jewish assassin; Arafat died; the children of the Oslo generation are killing each other. Unfortunately, Israelis and Palestinians will watch the swearing-in ceremony of Obama with a growing sense of, "No we can't" and "Change: We don't believe in it."