What Obama missed in the Middle East

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When I and other Palestinian-Americans first knew Barack Obama in Chicago in the 1990s, he grasped the oppression faced by Palestinians under Israeli occupation. He understood that an honest broker cannot simultaneously be the main cheerleader, financier and arms supplier for one side in a conflict. He often attended Palestinian-American community events and heard about the Palestinian experience from perspectives stifled in mainstream discussion.

In recent months, Obama has sought to allay persistent concerns from pro-Israel groups by recasting himself as a stalwart backer of Israel and tacking ever closer to positions espoused by the powerful, hard-line pro-Israel lobby Aipac. He distanced himself from mainstream advisers because pro-Israel groups objected to their calls for even-handedness.

Like his Republican rival, senator John McCain, Obama gave staunch backing to Israel's 2006 bombing of Lebanon, which killed over 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and the blockade and bombardment of the Gaza Strip, calling them "self defence".

Every aspect of Obama's visit to Palestine-Israel this week has seemed designed to further appease pro-Israel groups. Typically for an American aspirant to high office, he visited the Israeli Holocaust memorial and the Western Wall. He met the full spectrum of Israeli Jewish (though not Israeli Arab) political leaders. He travelled to the Israeli Jewish town of Sderot, which until last month's ceasefire, frequently experienced rockets from the Gaza Strip. At every step, Obama warmly professed his support for Israel and condemned Palestinian violence.

Other than a cursory 45-minute visit to occupied Ramallah to meet with Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, Palestinians got little. According to an Abbas aide, Obama provided assurances that he would be "a constructive partner in the peace process." Some observers took comfort in his promise that he would get engaged "starting from the minute I'm sworn into office". Obama remained silent on the issue of Jerusalem, after boldly promising the "undivided" city to Israel as its capital in a speech to Aipac last month, and then appearing to backtrack amid a wave of outrage across the Arab world.
But Obama missed the opportunity to visit Palestinian refugee camps, schools and even shopping malls to witness first-hand the devastation caused by the Israeli army and settlers, or to see how Palestinians cope under what many call "apartheid". This year

alone, almost 500 Palestinians, including over 70 children, have been killed by the Israeli army - exceeding the total for 2007 and dwarfing the two-dozen Israelis killed in conflict-related violence. Obama said nothing about Israel's relentless expansion of colonies on occupied land. Nor did he follow the courageous lead of former President Jimmy Carter and meet with the democratically elected Hamas leaders, even though Israel negotiated a ceasefire with them. That such steps are inconceivable shows how off-balance is the US debate on Palestine.

Many people I talk to are resigned to the conventional wisdom that aspiring national politicians cannot afford to be seen as sympathetic to the concerns of Palestinians, Arabs or Muslims. They still hope that, if elected, Obama would display an even-handedness absent in the campaign.

Without entirely foreclosing the possibility of change in US policy, the reality is that the political pressures evident in a campaign do not magically disappear once the campaign is over. Nor is all change necessarily for the better. One risk is that a President Obama or President McCain would just bring back the Clinton-era approach where the United States effectively acted as "Israel's lawyer", as Aaron David Miller, a 25-year veteran of the US state department's Middle East peace efforts, memorably put it. This led to a doubling of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, an upsurge in violence and the failed 2000 Camp David summit where Clinton tried to pressure Arafat into accepting a bantustan. A depressing feature of Obama's visit was the prominent advisory role for Dennis Ross, the official in charge of the peace process under Clinton, and the founder of an Aipac-sponsored pro-Israel think-tank.

Whoever is elected will face a rapidly changing situation in Palestine-Israel. A number of shifts are taking place simultaneously. First, the consensus supporting the two-state solution is disintegrating as Israeli colonies have rendered it unachievable. Second, the traditional Palestinian national leadership is being eclipsed by new movements including Hamas. And, as western and Arab governments become more craven in the face of Israeli human rights violations, a Palestinian-led campaign modelled on the anti-apartheid strategy of boycott, divestment and sanctions is building global civil society support. Finally, the demographic shift in Palestine-Israel toward an absolute Palestinian majority in all of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip will be complete in the next three to five years.

Making peace in this new reality will take leaders ready to listen and talk to all sides in the conflict and to consider alternatives to the moribund two-state solution, such as power-sharing, confederation or a single democratic state. It will require, above all, the courage, imagination and political will to challenge the status quo of Israeli domination and Palestinian dispossession that has led to ever more violence with each passing year.

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