

Obama in the Footsteps of Sadat

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In a much anticipated speech, the charismatic president, on a fleeting visit to Jerusalem, charmed and enthralled the audience and the wider Israeli public throughout the land.

His strategy soon became apparent. First, establish your credentials with assurances about the future safety of the state, underlining its right “to live ... in peace and security”. Lest there be any doubt, stress that “... the United

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States, your first ally which is absolutely committed to safeguard Israel's security and existence ... offers Israel every moral, material and military support”.

Then press the more sensitive buttons: “... peace cannot be worth its name unless it is based on justice, and not on the occupation of the land of others”. Full peace was contingent on the “achievement of the fundamental rights of the Palestinian People and their right to self-determination, including their right to establish their own state”.

The speech was a triumph and enabled the Egyptian President, Anwar Sadat, to hold sway over Israeli public opinion through the tough political battles that lay ahead with the hardline Israeli Prime Minister, Menachem Begin.

Four-and-a-half years later, Israel finally withdrew in full from the Sinai peninsula it had captured from Egypt during the June 1967 war, uprooting all of its settlements as part of the bargain.

Shortly after his visit in November 1977, in an article in *New Outlook*, I noted that President Sadat had accomplished, in one brief journey, what years of threats, military action and blanket boycotts had monumentally failed to achieve.

If there was a turning point during his visit it was when he proclaimed, “we really and truly welcome you to live among us ...”. At the time, there were sharp differences within the Arab world about whether or not to come to terms with the reality of the Jewish state and reluctantly to find a way of co-existing with it. Then, out of the blue, from over the desert, arose a great and familiar pharaoh

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to ardently welcome the scattered, ill-fated Jews back home. The psychological effect ran deep.

The euphoria of the Egyptian president's visit, although strongly condemned in the Arab world at large, galvanized the Israeli public and sparked off new political currents within the country, most notably the grassroots Peace Now movement. On the eve of the Begin-Sadat summit at Camp David in September of the following year, mediated by US President Carter, hundreds of thousands gathered in Tel Aviv to demand of their prime minister that he bring back a full peace agreement or not bother to come back, an image that reportedly haunted him throughout the negotiating process. In the face of the sustained momentum, a begrudging Menachem Begin eventually was impelled to withdraw from every centimetre of Egyptian territory.

It is worth noting that the Egyptian president, towards the end of his Jerusalem speech, had proclaimed: "I have not thought of carrying out this initiative from the concept of what could be achieved during this visit, but I have come here to deliver a message". Inevitably, the message took a little time to percolate and translate into tangible results.

Barack Obama, in a more recent visit to Israel by a charismatic foreign president, has been roundly criticized in some circles for not laying down concrete demands to the current Israeli Prime Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu. In a column in the *Guardian* (Analysis, 22 March), the Middle East editor Ian Black rightly noted that, "the president offered not a single practical proposal to advance the long-stalled peace process".

Together with his eager embrace of the Zionist narrative, what could be more galling than this to Palestinians, who have suffered decades of oppressive

military occupation with all the deprivations, confiscations and humiliations enforced rule by another people invariably entails? They were entitled to have expected more from Obama, even if they might have found encouragement in the vigorous applause of young Israelis when the US president referred to the Palestinians' plight and their need for their own state.

However, if the Sadat initiative was his model, President Obama may – possibly - have accomplished something rather more profound and far-reaching by his visit than simply laying down the law, which anyway would almost certainly have been repudiated by the dominant forces in the recently assembled Israeli government.

In his column, Ian Black observed that President Obama pulled off the trick of “appealing to ordinary Israelis over the heads of their leaders”. Thirty-five years earlier, in my *New Outlook* article, I had similarly noted that President Sadat appealed “at one and the same time to Premier Begin and his government and over their heads direct to the people of Israel”. The question now is just how far will that distant echo reverberate today?

It is one thing to come, deliver and fly off, but without a coherent and resolute, goal-driven, follow-up strategy, the Obama visit could turn out to be worse than a waste of time. Raising hopes and dashing them once again would be very damaging. If the Obama initiative succeeds in emulating the Sadat initiative by triggering new political currents in Israel, it is imperative that they are cultivated and nourished.

Obama is now a key player and a sizeable portion of Israeli public opinion will be looking to the US president for continued direction. The impetus must not be lost. Like Sadat before him, it is imperative that Obama, together with his

spirited secretary of state John Kerry, keeps his foot on the pedal and does not disappoint the constituencies within Israel he has inspired, generated or revived. Irreversible progress needs to be made while he is still in office.

While bona fide reciprocal gestures could be of value if they help spark a genuine political momentum, reverting to a policy of phoney, incremental, so-called 'confidence-building measures', aimed at reviving sham negotiations - repeating all the mistakes of the past - is absolutely not the route to follow.

Building trust between an occupying authority and an occupied people is a fundamentally flawed concept. Concrete progress depends, above all, on a transformation of the political climate in Israel, which will very probably require a change of government at the next election, ideally within the next couple of years.

All parties could help play a role to this end if they think and act strategically. Importantly, this needs to include the architects of the recently reaffirmed Arab Peace Initiative, which proposes that in return for Israel relinquishing the territories it captured in 1967, normal relations be established between Israel and all Arab states. They have a good product but thus far have displayed indifferent marketing skills. In particular, they have barely made an effort to win over Israeli public opinion by appealing direct to the people and elaborating to them the plan's explicit and implicit benefits. It seems its authors felt it was enough to let the document speak for itself. This was poor psychology.

There was an unexpected shift away from the right in the most recent election in Israel, even if it turns out that, for now, the new - not very stable - government is the most pro-settler in Israel's history. It would not take much

more of a swing for a pro-peace coalition to be put together following the next election. Only then would it make sense to convene final-status negotiations.

In the fullness of time, if Obama's Jerusalem speech, coupled with equally canny follow-up steps, helps to precipitate the necessary change in political mood within Israel, history might judge the president's approach to have been a lot smarter than has been credited by the instant judgements of some of his critics.

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