



The Arab/Islamic View of Obama From Euphoria to Skepticism

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I was sailing on the Nile with a group of friends when the news of Obama's victory reached us. It was dawn and our small *Dahabiyah*¹ was about to leave a small Island south of Luxor. The response of our Egyptian crew and many others in the local population was as exuberant as was reported in other cities around the globe. As *Uri Avnery* noted,² most opinions about people are formed based on emotion, not rational thought. As a case in point, he referred to Sadat's historic trip to Jerusalem and how he was able that day to change the minds of Israelis so they could accept the possibility of peace with Egypt. By analogy, *Avnery* opined that president-elect Obama is equally capable of changing the

minds of the Muslim/Arab people. For a few days in Upper Egypt, I witnessed on a small scale the reality of that potential. But, such euphoria is often ephemeral.

Once back in Cairo the views of the political pundits and media analysts were cautious at best and often skeptical in their assessments of the president-elect's intentions. In the Middle East, particularly with respect to Washington, every move involving the region, no matter how small, is interpreted and assigned a political value. PI Online examines the analyses emerging from the Arab/Islamic World following the Obama victory.

Many years have passed since Sadat's goodwill gesture and the mood in Israel has changed. In his article last month, "Netanyahu faces Obama",³ *Arfan Nizam al-Din* ponders the consequences of the Likud's expected win in the upcoming Israeli elections in February and the death of the Annapolis process. Most analysts now doubt that the current Israeli population would allow *Livny's* Kadima party to retain power, or allow a *Likud* party headed by *Netanyahu* to pursue the creation of a Palestinian state. Thus, *Nizam al-Din* summarized the main question for Arab/Islamic skeptics as follows: "Will *Obama* be allowed to escape the Zionist cage that has imprisoned most previous U.S. presidents to prevent them from implementing their forward thinking in bringing about a fair solution to the Middle East crisis."

The answer was not long forthcoming however. Within a few short days after the election, when the Israeli newspaper *Ma'ariv* called the president-elect's choice for Chief of Staff, *Rahm Emanuel*, "our man in the White House", the Arab press went from a state of euphoria about an Obama presidency to a state of cautious pessimism. Many Arab analysts⁴ view Obama's appointment of *Emanuel* as serving to reassure the Israeli lobby rather than providing any hope for a more balanced and objective approach to the Middle East problem. As U.S. analyst Chris Matthews has noted, Obama may be appointing some individuals to his right in order to enable him to govern from the left. As far as Middle East politics is concerned, however, all what the Arabs hope for, one analyst told me, is that Obama will be allowed to govern from the center.

Publishing in *Al-Jazeera*⁵, Palestinian writer *Osama Abu-Arshid* asks how *Obama* will be able to reconcile his "personal beliefs that tended, in his pre-election senate days, to express some sympathy towards the Palestinian problem...and the necessity to conform to the general political stand adopted in the United States, which considers the absolute support of Israel as one of the government's main policy components." The writer expands on what he

¹ A *Dahabiyah* is a flat-bottomed boat

² Source: November 27th, 2008 - www.gush-shalom.org

³ Source: November 24th, 2008 - <http://www.alhayat.com/opinion/11-2008/Item-20081123-ca529841-coa8-10ed-0160-3408e7029f48/story.html>

⁴ Source: November 13th, 2008 - <http://www.islammemo.cc/mobile/Articlen.aspx?id=72478&catid=640&did=0>

⁵ Source: November 30th, 2008 - <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/A0304EC1-C114-4BEC-AA23-2A34BF5254A9.htm>

views as the dilemma posed by the unconditional support for Israel expressed by Obama in his speech to AIPAC⁶ and the support he has expressed for a permanent Middle East peace, which will require compromise. Contrary to the *Bush* years, *Abu Arshid* sees the appointment of *Hillary Clinton* as Secretary of State as signaling a return to the policy of direct involvement in the negotiations that was favored by *Bill Clinton*. He states, however, that Obama's intention to pursue a Middle East peace initiative early in his administration, while genuine in principle, will require a change in the U.S. attitude towards Israel. While *Abu Arshid* continues to hope that such a change will materialize, he says that he has yet to see any concrete sign of it from the incoming administration. He fears that, regardless of how sympathetic Obama is towards the Palestinians, the history of U.S. – Israeli relations is stronger than the will of any U.S. president.

Other Arab analysts also point out that only pro-Israel Jews like Denis Ross and Daniel Kurtzer are advising Obama on Middle East policy. Others like Robert Malley, himself a Jew, or Zbigniew Brzezinski who have advocated “a genuine dialogue with Hamas” have been labeled anti-Semitic by the Pro-Israel hardliners and are no longer advisers to Obama.

Obama's policies in the Middle East will inevitably be driven by events currently unfolding in Israel and Palestinian territories. Writing today in *Al-Hayat*,⁷ analyst *Rasim Al-Madhoun* argues that the two major problems confronting the Palestinian-Israeli peace initiative are the refusal of the hard liners in Israel to make necessary territorial concessions and Hamas' Islamic agenda. These two problems are likely to slow down or kill any peace process regardless of Obama's best intentions. However, the current bombing of Gaza, although tragic for its horrific bloodshed, may change the equation. There is no doubt in most observers' mind that internal Israeli politics has played a role in the timing of the attack on Gaza. As a consequence of the current hawkish posture of the otherwise moderate *Livni* and *Barak*, Kadima/Labor coalition may be able to form a government after the coming elections, while at the same time Hamas could be substantially weakened. Such a confluence of events could usher in a new era of a more functional but still moderate Israeli government capable to take on the challenge of confronting the West Bank settlers and a stronger national, rather than Islamic, Palestinian authority headed by *Mahmoud Abbas*, or another new leader willing to compromise.

In the labyrinth of the Middle East, however, such opportunities have been fleeting and elusive. Thus, it remains to be seen if events will help or hinder president-elect Obama as he seeks to make good on his promise to change U.S. foreign policy and play a more constructive role on the world stage.

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⁶ Reference to Obama's speech on June 4th, 2008 in front of the American Israel Public Affair Committee.

⁷ Source: December 29, 2008 – Al-hayat newspaper - <http://www.alhayat.com/opinion/ideas/12-2008/Item-20081228-7eb3do8b-coa8-1oed-0obe-61088c4192d3/story.html>