

Obama's charm offensive for radical rulers abandons Israel to Iranian threat

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The new US president's dramatic global policy steps have easily dwarfed the knotty Israeli-Palestinian peace issue handed down from one US president to the next over decades. Barack Obama's outstretched hand to Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, Iran's best friend in the Americas, on April 17, at the summit of American leaders in Port of Prince, made the talk surrounding Special Middle East Envoy George Mitchell's mission to Jerusalem and Ramallah this week sound eerily like voices from the past.

After talking to Mitchell, Israel's prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu and defense minister Ehud Barak tried the usual bromides: They protested that Jerusalem's ties with Washington and Jerusalem were as strong as ever and they would work together toward an agreed solution for the Palestinian problem.

But those words were lost in the black Iranian cloud hanging over the relations.

Barack Obama has set his sights and heart on friendship with the rulers of the Islamic Republic of Iran and their radical allies. The name and policies of the occupant of the prime minister's office in Jerusalem do not matter - any more than Tehran's determination to complete its nuclear weapons program in defiance of the world, or even its first A-bomb test in a year or two, for which intelligence sources report Tehran is already getting set.

Obama's Washington believes America can live with a nuclear-armed Iran - a decision probably taken first under the Bush presidency. But Israel cannot, and may have no option but to part ways with the Obama administration on this point. As a nuclear power, Iran will be able to bend Jerusalem to the will of its enemies, make it

unconditionally give Syria the Golan plus extra pieces of territory, tamely accept a Hamas-dominated Palestinian West Bank luring over its heartland and let the Lebanese Hizballah terrorize Galilee in the north at will. All three would make hay under Iran's nuclear shield, while Tehran lords it over the region in the role of regional power conferred by Obama's grace and favor.

In no time, Israel would be stripped of most of its defenses.

Israel is not the only nervous country in the region. But Hosni Mubarak of Egypt is the only Middle East leader brave enough to stick his neck out, albeit with Saudi backing, and stand up to the Iranian peril, direct and through Hizballah.

He has also outspokenly criticized Washington's courtship of the revolutionary Islamic republic.

Cairo's Al Ahram Saturday, April 18, accused Iran, Syria, Qatar, Hizballah, Hamas, al Jazeera TV of a conspiracy to overthrow Egyptian government.

But the US president is not daunted by the radicalism or enmity of his new friends or the loss of old ones. At the Summit of All Americas, Obama greeted Hugo Chavez 24 hours after the Venezuelan ruler said: "The United States Empire is on its way down and will be finished in the near future, inshallah!"

Using the Muslim blessing to underline the wish for America's downfall was no bar to the smile and handshake; neither was Venezuela's recent severance of its ties with Israel for no provocation or its willingness to host a delegation of Hizballah (internationally branded a terrorist organization) in Caracas.

What is relevant to Obama is Hugo Chavez's role as co-architect of the joint Russian-Iranian campaign to displace American influence in the southern hemisphere. The US president has opted for winning America's enemies over with smiles and embraces rather than punishing them like George W. Bush.

Obama continues to woo Bashar Assad apace despite his blunt refusal to loosen his strategic ties with Tehran or stop supporting the Lebanese Shiite group [with arms] because Hizballah is dedicated to fighting Israel, - as he is quoted as saying in the pro-Hizballah Lebanese publication al Akhbar on April 17.

For the first time in years, the administration this week sent a high-ranking delegation to Syria's independence day celebrations at Washington's Mandarin Oriental Hotel, headed by Jeffrey Feltman, former ambassador and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs.

The thaw in relations has gone so far that some Washington wags are calling Assad's capital "Syria on the Potomac."

The American storm besetting the Middle East leaves Israel's most vital interests way behind. The condition Netanyahu put before Mitchell for progress in peacemaking - that Israel be recognized as a Jewish state, which was instantly rejected by Palestinian Authority leaders - aroused scant attention in Washington or anywhere else.

As Netanyahu will find when he meets Obama in Washington early next month, Israel is no longer a prime factor in US global policy, because America has fundamentally reshuffled its Middle East allegiances and alliances. Even Tzipi Livni at the helm in Jerusalem would not divert Obama from his détente with Ahmadinejad, Assad and Chavez.

To gain points with his new friends, Obama's White House is not above nudging Israel to please them. This week, his chief of staff Rahm Emanuel told Jewish leaders whom he met in Washington that if Israel wants America's help for thwarting Iran's nuclear program, it must first start evacuating West Bank settlements.

This was of course cynical claptrap.

Even if every single settlement were to be removed and Israel lined up with Obama's quest for a Palestinian state alongside Israel, the US president would not drop Tehran or help Israel strike Iran's nuclear facilities. He has already ceded Tehran's uranium enrichment program (and therefore its drive for nuclear arms), and would forcefully oppose any Israeli military action. US defense secretary Robert Gates indicated as much this week when he went to almost absurd lengths to play down the Iranian nuclear threat and Israel's ability to handle it.

So what options are left to Israel at this juncture?

1. To bow under the Obama tempest until it blows over in keeping with the old proverb which says that trees bowing in the wind remain standing. This would entail going along with US acceptance of Iran as a nuclear power. The question is will Israel's trees still be standing when the storm has passed and, if so, in what strategic environment?
2. To follow the example set by Likud's first prime minister Menahem Begin in 1981. He stood up to Ronald Reagan's fierce objections and sent the Israeli Air force to smash the Iraqi nuclear reactor before it was operational. Saddam Hussein never rebuilt the facility. By following in Begin's footsteps before it is too late, Netanyahu would change the rules of the game regionally and globally.

(The London Times reported from Jerusalem Saturday that the Israeli military is preparing itself to launch a massive aerial assault on Iran's nuclear facilities within days of being given the go-ahead by its new government. Two civil defense drills have been scheduled to prepare the population for missiles that could fall on any part of the country without warning.)

3. Israel could go for a more modest target, one of Iran's faithful surrogates – Syria or Hizballah – to warn Washington that a larger operation is in store for their boss. If the Gaza offensive against Hamas last January was meant to send this message, it failed. Hamas is still the dominant Palestinian power and Barack Obama was not swayed from forging ahead with his policies of rapprochement with Iran and other radical world leaders.

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