

# Obama Goes AIPAC-ing

Like many American politicians before him, President Barack Obama paid his respects on the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), mostly telling the powerful lobby what it wanted to hear about the greatness of Israel and the evils of its adversaries (even with a straight face accusing Hezbollah of engaging in assassination of its enemies, as if the U.S. and Israel don't do the same). As Lawrence Davidson notes, many of Obama's sweet nothings were equally hypocritical.

By Lawrence Davidson

May 23, 2011

President Obama addressed the Zionist lobby AIPAC on Sunday, just three days after his major speech on the Middle East, in which he paid attention to the popular uprisings going on in the region and placed himself, at least rhetorically, on the side of those seeking democratic reform.

But then, in typical diplomatic fashion, he gave no indication that his administration would do anything forceful to prevent the current violent suppression of democratic protesters in those places where, one might assume, the U.S. actually has influence, like Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The speech to AIPAC was of a similar nature.

In his May 19 speech on the Middle East, the President said that the 1967 border was an appropriate starting point for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Within the pro-Israeli environment of American domestic politics, many Zionists took offense.

So, the speech on Sunday was diplomatically required to reassure them of the toothless nature of the original assertion, making the AIPAC address rather wearisome.

The first half was all about how the U.S. is so solidly committed to Israel that whatever the Israelis do Washington will never abandon them. It was all about how the U.S. is going to keep on arming them so that, in effect, they will continue to have no incentive to negotiate justly with the Palestinians.

In other words, the first half of the speech was all about why the Israelis and their supporters need pay no attention to the 1967 borders.

The President also peppered the talk with statements that, I am sorry to say, sound utterly wrong to anyone with an objective sense of the present situation. Here are just a couple of examples:

–“We also know how difficult that search for security can be, especially for a small nation like Israel in a tough neighborhood.”

Israel is not so much a small nation as a military giant. Obama knows that because it is the U.S. that has done the most to make Israel flagrantly oversized in this regard.

In doing so Washington allowed Israel to become the bully that dominates the neighborhood. In other words, the President, as almost all of his modern predecessors before him, was reversing the facts for the sake of domestic political advantage.

–“No country can be expected to negotiate with a terrorist organization sworn to its destruction.”

This reference was, of course, to Hamas. To call Hamas a “terrorist organization” is considerably out of date. Actually, it would be more fitting to assign the epithet to the Israeli government.

That purveyor of state terrorism has brought sudden death to much larger numbers of innocent people than Hamas. And, using Obama’s logic, one might argue that Hamas should not be expected to negotiate with Israel, because Israel adamantly refuses to recognize it as the legitimately elected government of Palestine (which it is) and is “sworn to its destruction.”

Further, as Palestine’s legally elected government, Hamas too has a right to defend itself against predatory neighbors.

–“America’s commitment to Israel also flows from a deeper place and that is the values we share.”

There is something really embarrassing, actually downright humiliating, about the first African-American president of the United States saying this about a prima facie racist state like Israel.

The two countries do not share any important values. This can be seen clearly in the fact that, when it comes to societal goals, the two lands are moving in starkly opposite directions.

At least since the end of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s the United States has moved in the direction of greater and greater inclusiveness. This movement has not always been smooth and consistent. However, today President Obama himself stands as living proof that inclusiveness is the direction American society has consciously set for itself.

Not so Israel. Here it is the opposite exclusiveness is the goal. If you are not

Jewish, the goal of Israeli society is to render you a second-class citizen and, eventually, expel you altogether.

In terms of democracy, this makes Israel as democratic as, say, Alabama circa 1950. As a nation, the United States has left that era behind. So tell me, where are the shared values?

In his speech to AIPAC, President Obama sought to avoid "idealism or naivete." He claimed to be approaching the Israel-Palestine problem in a "hard-headed" manner.

Let me do the same. The American domestic political dance done obsessively by all recent presidents has never resulted in anything positive on the ground in Israel-Palestine.

Indeed, U.S. foreign policy has only sustained Israel's ability not to resolve the conflict. As a consequence of this Washington has rendered itself largely irrelevant to any final just resolution of this contest.

Take the issue of the 1967 border, which is the center of the present political flap in the U.S. It has significance only if you assume that there will be a viable two-state solution.

However, long ago Israel has demonstrated that this will never happen. That was what Netanyahu was trying to tell Obama over the last few days.

Most Palestinians and their worldwide supporters know this quite well. However, what neither Obama nor Netanyahu will admit is that the probable future of the Israel-Palestine conflict lies along a path that parallels the one taken by apartheid South Africa.

In other words, the fate of Israel-Palestine is no longer in the hands of the Israelis and the Palestinians alone. The entire conflict has been internationalized.

There is a quickly growing world-wide Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement that has joined the fray and its actions will, in the end, be more significant in resolving this struggle than those of any American president.

Weariness and boredom set in when you listen to people repeat themselves endlessly. Within the democratic political realm, that is the obsessive spell lobbies can cast on politicians.

It is a design flaw, if you will, in the democratic system. The lobbies act like jealous gods who need to hear the prayers of their devotees said again and again. I am loyal, I am yours, forever, forever.

Deviation means blasphemy and blasphemy means that the gods will bestow their cash blessings on someone else come the next election cycle.

It is weariness and boredom, a pronounced ennui, that one experiences when presidents go AIPACing. It would be better if they just sent an e-mail.

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## Obama's Covert Clash with Pakistan

U.S. intelligence analysts have concluded that American success in the Afghan War requires Pakistani help in rooting out Taliban safe havens along the border but that Pakistan is unwilling to turn against its longtime Taliban allies a conundrum that continues to bedevil the Obama administration and U.S. military commanders, writes Gareth Porter in this analysis for Inter Press Services.

By Gareth Porter

May 23, 2011

The unilateral U.S. raid that killed Osama bin Laden created a spike in mutual recriminations between U.S. and Pakistani politicians, but their fundamental conflict of interest over Afghanistan was already driving the two countries toward serious confrontation.

The pivotal event in relations between the Obama administration and Pakistan was the decision by President Barack Obama to escalate the war in Afghanistan in 2009, despite the knowledge that Pakistan was committed to supporting the Taliban insurgents as a strategic policy in its conflict with India.

Obama launched a desperate, last-minute effort to get some kind of commitment from the Pakistanis to reduce their support for the Taliban before the decision to escalate the war. But he did not reconsider the decision after that effort had clearly failed.

It was always understood within the Obama administration that any public recognition that Pakistan was committed to supporting the Taliban could be politically dangerous to the war effort.

As a result, Obama's national security team decided early on to deny the complicity of Pakistani Chief of Staff Ashfaq Parvez Kayani and director of the ISI intelligence agency Shuja Pasha, despite the knowledge that they were fully behind the policy.

On March 26, 2009, a story in the New York Times provided the most detailed news

media account up to that date of Pakistani assistance to the Taliban. But the story quoted anonymous U.S. officials as blaming “mid-level ISI operatives” and expressing doubt that top Pakistani officials in Islamabad were directly coordinating the clandestine efforts by ISI operatives to assist the Taliban.

That did not reflect the briefing Obama had gotten from George W. Bush’s director of national intelligence, Mike McConnell, after his election. McConnell had learned from communications intercepts that Kayani considered the Haqqani network, which was being targeted as the most serious threat to U.S. troops in Afghanistan, as a “strategic asset.”

As Obama approached a decision on Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal’s request for another troop increase of as much as 40,000 troops, the Pakistani military’s determination to use the Taliban and the Haqqani network to advance Pakistani interests in Afghanistan was a major issue in the policy debate.

Opponents of the troop surge request, including Vice President Joe Biden, deputy national security adviser Tom Donilon and Afghanistan War coordinator Douglas Lute, argued that the Pakistanis were not going to change their policy toward Afghanistan, according to Bob Woodward’s account in *Obama’s Wars*.

Biden argued in a meeting on Sept. 13, 2009, that Pakistan was determined to avoid an Afghan government “led by a Pashtun sympathetic to India” i.e., Afghan President Hamid Karzai. The conclusion was that the Pakistanis would continue to aid the insurgency the U.S. was trying to defeat. “Despite that argument, as the policymaking process was entering its final weeks, Obama tried to exert high-level pressure on Pakistan.

In a Nov. 11, 2009, letter to Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, Obama said Pakistan’s use of such “proxy groups” as Haqqani and the Taliban would no longer be tolerated, as Woodward recounts. National Security Adviser James Jones and Counterterrorism adviser John Brennan were sent to Islamabad to deliver the message.

Obama wanted Pakistan to understand that he would take unilateral action against the Taliban and Haqqani safe havens in Pakistan, including accelerated drone strikes and commando raids, unless Pakistani forces attacked them.

That message was clearly received. A Pakistani official told the New York Times, “Jones’s message was if that Pakistani help wasn’t forthcoming, the United States would have to do it themselves.”

The week of Nov. 17, 2009, CIA Director Leon Panetta met with Pasha and other top Pakistani officials, and complained about the presence of the Taliban leadership headquarters in Quetta, Baluchistan, according to Woodward’s account.

Panetta cited intelligence that bombs were being made there, then “taken across the border and blowing up Americans.”

Panetta proposed joint U.S.-Pakistani operations on the ground aimed at the Quetta Shura, but Kayani refused. “In a response to Obama’s letter late in November, Zardari voiced the Pakistani military’s rationale for Pakistan’s use of Afghan insurgents to protect its interests in Pakistan. He charged that “neighboring intelligence agencies” meaning India “are using Afghan soil to perpetuate violence in Pakistan.”

And Zardari did not give a clear response to Obama’s invitation to plan joint operations against those forces.

When Obama met with his national security team in a decisive meeting on Nov. 29, he knew that the pressure tactic had failed. Lute, Obama’s Afghanistan coordinator, warned that Pakistani policy was one of four major, interacting risks of a troop surge policy.

But Obama approved a plan for 30,000 additional troops anyway, suggesting that the decision was driven by the political-bureaucratic momentum of the war rather than by a rational assessment of cost, risk and benefit.

Throughout 2010, the Pakistani military continued to make clear its refusal to compromise on its interests in Afghanistan. In late January 2010, U.S. and Pakistani authorities picked up Mullah Ghani Baradar, the second-ranking official in the Taliban Quetta Shura, in a raid in Karachi apparently without realizing in advance that Baradar was present.

But when the United States sought to extradite Baradar to Afghanistan, the Pakistanis refused. And Baradar and several other members of the Quetta Shura who had been detained by the Pakistanis were reported in October 2010 to have been released.

In a January 2011 interview with Public Broadcasting System’s “Frontline”, Gen. David Petraeus, by then the commander in Afghanistan, was asked about Pakistan’s release of top Taliban leaders. “We’ve actually had a conversation on this very recently,” said Petraeus blandly, “and in fact there has been a request for information.”

Two National Intelligence Estimates on Afghanistan and Pakistan in December 2010 pointed once again to the centrality of Pakistani policy to the outcome of the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan.

The NIE on Afghanistan concluded that the United States was unlikely to succeed in Afghanistan unless Pakistan changed its policy to take military action

against insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan. But the estimate on Pakistan made it clear that no such change in Pakistani policy could be expected.

In mid-December, the Obama administration issued a five-page summary of its December 2010 review of the Afghanistan War, which concluded that the “gains” were “fragile and reversible” and that consolidating those gains “will require that we make more progress with Pakistan to eliminate sanctuaries for violent extremist networks.”

Immediately after that review, the New York Times reported a military proposal for cross-border raids into Pakistan aimed at capturing Taliban commanders for interrogation back in Afghanistan.

Beginning in late 2010, moreover, the U.S. infiltrated hundreds of unilateral intelligence agents into Pakistan, suggesting an intention to carry out further cross-border raids.

Those moves had already alarmed Pakistan’s military leaders well before the U.S. raid against bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad.

And in a classified report sent to Congress in early April, the Obama administration strongly criticized Pakistan’s failure to attack insurgent safe havens in Mohmand in northwest Pakistan for three straight years, as reported by the New York Times on April 5.

Moeed Yusuf, director of the South Asia program at the U.S. Institute of Peace, who has been leading a study of Pakistani elite opinion on relations with the United States, believes the crisis in U.S.-Pakistan relations can be blamed on a failure of both governments to acknowledge explicitly the existence of a fundamental conflict of interests.

“If there is a strategic divergence of interests, I think Pakistan needs to put it on the table,” said Yusuf. Pakistani leaders “need to be very candid about why it’s not in their interests” to do what Washington wants, he said.

If the interests at stake are not brought into the open, Yusuf suggested, “a rupture is possible.”

**Gareth Porter is an investigative historian and journalist specializing in U.S. national security policy. The paperback edition of his latest book, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam*, was published in 2006.**

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