



Obama in Australia

Obama: The Good, the Bad and the Unknown

As Barack Obama marks his first visit to Australia, Dr Martin Sherman considers the faltering state of American-Israeli relations and how worse may be yet to come.

“Islam has always been a part of America’s story... the truth is that America and Islam are not exclusive, ... Instead, they overlap, and share common principles – principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings. (Barack Obama, Cairo, 2009).

THE unflattering remarks regarding Benjamin Netanyahu made by Nicolas Sarkozy and their tacit endorsement by Barack Obama, inadvertently broadcast to journalists at the recent G20 summit in Cannes, have once again ignited public debate on the state of the relationship between Israel and the White House.

In the past, relations between Netanyahu and Obama have undeniably been less than amicable. Incidents, in which naked acrimony flared up publicly, have occurred with an uncomfortable frequency, uncharacteristic of previous US administrations.

Significantly, after almost three years in office, and after visiting a spate of Muslim countries, Obama has found neither the time nor the need to visit Israel.

For those who believe that “c’est le ton qui fait la chanson”, or it’s not what you say, but how you say it, these are certainly ominous omens.

On the other hand, as Democratic Congressman Gary Ackerman pointed out recently on his website, despite “mistakes” in Obama’s Israel policy, which at times was “wrong-headed”, the current administration has acted frequently and forcefully to preserve and promote Israeli interests on a number critical issues.

These have included enhancing military aid for Israel’s anti-missile program, exercising US veto power to block a one-sided resolution condemning Israel on settlements; strongly supporting Israel at the UN to block the Palestinian unilateral bid for statehood, among others.

These and other measures beneficial to Israel undertaken by the Obama administration are far from trivial. They cannot – and should not be denied – or disregarded.

However, the more circumspect – or cynical – might suggest that this pro-Israel largesse should not be ascribed to any favourable change in sentiment towards Israel. Rather, it should be seen

as a result of growing concern over the consequences of a Jewish voter backlash, fuelled by what many considered a grossly biased approach towards Israel.

Indeed, it is not totally implausible to attribute – at least partially – Obama’s robust rebuttal of the Palestinians’ UN statehood bid to the shock defeat of the Democrats by a Republican – for the first time in almost a century – in recent elections in New York’s 9th congressional district. With its large Jewish population, the issue of the administration’s treatment of Israel had been a central issue in the elections, and the results were widely interpreted as a wake-up call on this matter.

The question of what motivates the current administration is of definite significance as the 2012 elections approach. For if the pro-Israel elements apparent in some recent actions of the administration are the result of perceived electoral constraints alone, the question of how Israel will be treated by a second-term president with a fundamentally adversarial agenda and free of re-election concerns becomes acute.

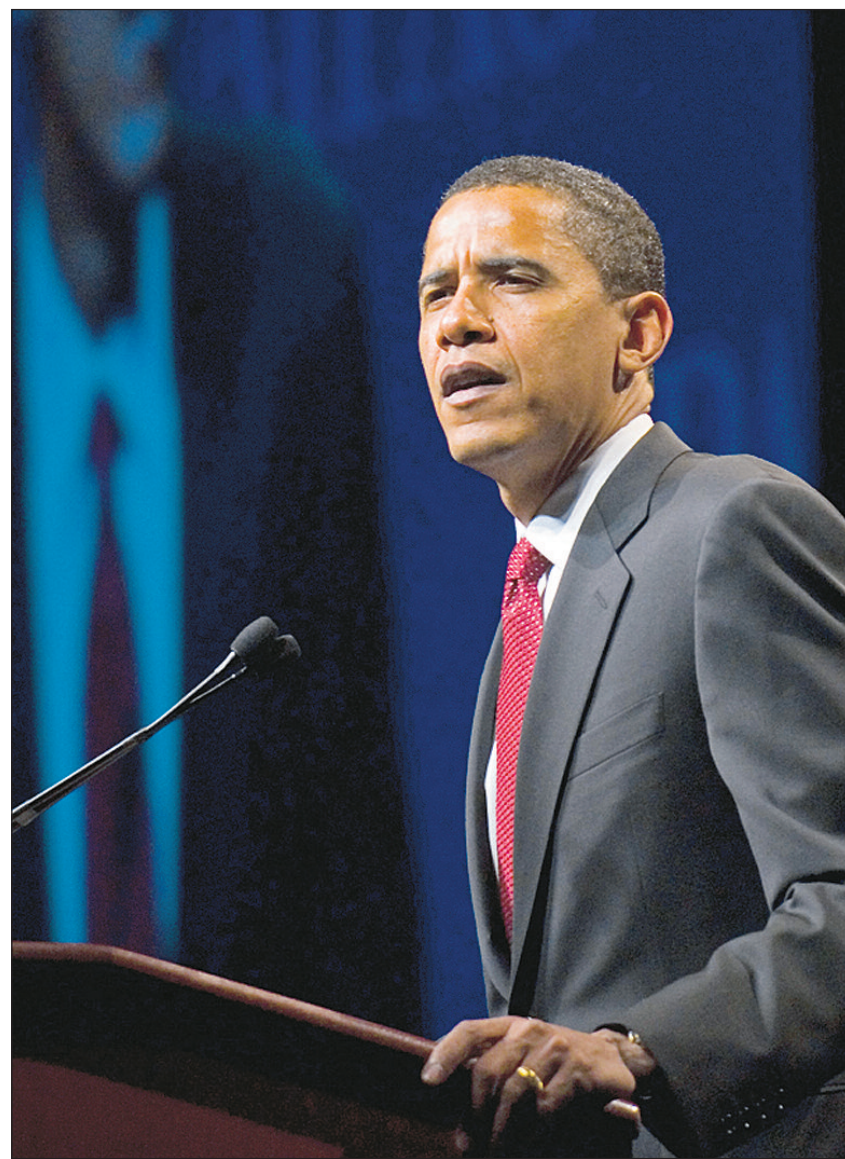
The prospect of a White House incumbent with an inherent affinity for Israel’s adversaries and unshackled by considerations of re-election is one that must be considered with the utmost seriousness.

In this regard, Obama’s primal sentiments towards Israel should be assessed within the framework of his overall Weltanschauung.

In many ways, the inputs that have gone into shaping his geopolitical credo cannot but generate a sense of unease – both in terms of his associates and his formative environment.

His perception of the international role the US should play, the nature of the country’s interests, and the manner in which these interests should be pursued seems to be a dramatic departure from that of most of his predecessors.

It is an approach that involves the US being less of a leader and more of a co-participant in international affairs; a reduced belief in American “exceptionalism”; assigning a greater role to the inherently anti-Israel UN; a perception that



Israel needs to develop strategies for dealing with the possibility of President Obama (above) winning a second term.

Photo: JTA

Islam is not inherently inimical to American values.

Admittedly, much water has flown under the bridge since Obama’s initial outreach address to the Muslim world in Cairo (June 2009) shortly after his election. But precisely because it was delivered when he was still unencumbered by domestic constraints and foreign frustrations, it perhaps reflected most accurately the unfiltered essence of the political instincts he brought to the Oval Office.

Although he did chide the Muslim world for the lack of political freedom,

contend effectively such a grave prospect, Israel must adopt the prudent maxim: “Hope for the best; plan for the worst.”

It urgently needs to devise a comprehensive US strategy designed to contain, constrain and compensate for, possible future executive antipathy. Such a strategy would entail cultivating more imitate working relations with Congress, where Israel enjoys strong bipartisan support, but which has not always received sufficient attention in the overall focus of Israeli foreign policy.

The pro-Israel sentiment in the legislature is reflected in the near-record levels of support for Israel in the American public, and which, according to the latest Gallup poll, is four times that for the Palestinians. This too should be marshalled for political ends far more effectively than it has been in the past.

Likewise, the Christian Evangelicals, who according to some estimates number around 80 million, comprise one of the strongest and most fervent bases of identification with Israel and one which the country has been woefully remiss in rallying as a strategic asset.

Israel cannot determine who will be the president of the United States. However, it can – and must – turn to mobilising alternative arms of government, and the impressive sources of popular support it enjoys, into real political influence

How this should be done (and why to date it hasn’t been) would require a detailed analysis of the functioning (or lack thereof) of Israel’s public diplomacy – and that must be delayed for a future opportunity

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gender equality and religious freedom, the overall tenor of the address was one of glowing accolades for Islamic achievement and imaginative apologetics for its failures – based on questionable, indeed at times fanciful, interpretations of history, as the introductory excerpt illustrates.

While it is in no way a definitive diagnosis, there is a distinct possibility that Israel could face a second-term president, who is fundamentally unmoored to America’s Judaeo-Christian heritage, a heritage, which despite occasional periods of tensions, was for decades the elemental underpinning of the relationship between the two countries.

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