

Active

Can Obama meet



By Mustafa Barghouti

The Israeli prime minister frustrated President Clinton's peace efforts; the new president must do better

I cannot recall a more important meeting between an American president and an Israeli prime minister than today's meeting between President Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Will the Obama administration have the courage to challenge Netanyahu, or will all the talk of change dissolve in the face of a concerted one-two punch from Netanyahu and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee?

I am increasingly convinced that if Obama fails to speak out now, it will doom the two-state solution forever. Further fiddling in Washington - after eight years of it - will consign Jerusalem, the West Bank and the two-state solution

to an Israeli expansionism that will overwhelm the ability of cartographers to construct a viable Palestinian state.

It's now or almost certainly never. If Obama lacks the political will to stand up to Netanyahu now, he will lack the capacity later. And by the time Obama leaves office, it will be too late to salvage anything more than an archipelago of

was in Washington in February and did not find that to be the case. The Obama administration, I was pleased to hear, planned to be in neither the Israelis' nor the Palestinians' pocket. That is all we Palestinians have ever asked.

Yet, just as in the '90s, Netanyahu believes that he is the world's driving force and that a Democratic president should be

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Palestinian Bantustans. We Palestinians seek freedom, not apartheid, and not the sort of Potemkin villages on the West Bank that Netanyahu is trying to package to the West as visionary economic boomtowns for desperate Palestinians. Yes, we want economic improvement, but the best way to achieve that is through control over our own lives, borders and resources.

Israel's new foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, claimed in an April interview that "America accepts all our decisions." I

following his lead. In his memoir, former lead American negotiator Dennis Ross quoted an exasperated President Clinton as complaining that Netanyahu comported himself as though he thought Israel, and not the United States, was the superpower. That doesn't appear to have changed. How else to explain the recent assertion by Israeli officials that before Israel will address core Palestinian-Israeli negotiating issues, the United States must deal - apparently to Israel's satisfaction - with

Netanyahu's challenge?

Iran's nuclear program?

The false Iran-Palestine linkage troubles me because its Israeli boosters think that Iran is an immediate concern, and Palestinian freedom can once again be kicked down the road. Danny Ayalon,



Barack Obama

Israel's deputy foreign minister and a representative of Lieberman's extremist Yisrael Beiteinu party, said in April that "the Iranian clock should be measured in months," but the Palestinian timetable "is open-ended."

What Ayalon, Lieberman and Netanyahu fail to grasp is the world's increasing recognition that they are

attempting to dictate the timetable for another people's freedom. This is unacceptable in the 21st century.

Yet Netanyahu wants either an impossibly long timetable or no Palestinian state at all. In May 2002, when the central committee of the Likud Party voted on a resolution declaring that "no Palestinian state will be established west of the Jordan

And it's wrong. Palestinians in the occupied territories have no standing to sign away the rights of the Palestinian citizens of Israel in order to get Israel to the negotiating table. To tell the truth, we don't believe that Israel can be a true democracy and an exclusivist Jewish state at the same time. Yet Israeli leaders seem oblivious - or pretend to be oblivious - to why

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River," Netanyahu urged party members to support the resolution. To this day, he has failed to embrace the idea of a Palestinian state, even though the two-state solution has been Israel's avowed policy for years. He hopes to destroy the idea, de facto, through delays that allow time for further settlement activity.

More recently, Netanyahu has added a new demand: that Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state. This is intended only to confuse and delay peace talks.

Palestinians would decline to acknowledge Israel's status as a Jewish state.

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The choice is Israel's: two states, or

increasing isolation by a world that will not accept apartheid dressed up as an economic development plan. Tragically, the consequences of further delay and oppression will be endured by Palestinians - both in the occupied territories and in an increasingly



Benjamin Netanyahu

exclusivist Jewish state whose self-definition comes at the expense of Palestinian citizens. COURTESY LOS ANGELES TIMES

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