

**Press Release 6/7/2011**

**THE FUTURE OF PALESTINE**

On Wednesday, 6 July 2011, Sinna Mani, President of the British Organisation of People of Indian Origin (BOPIO), delivered a speech to an audience in the House of Lords, Westminster. The audience included members of the Upper Chamber, a junior minister, as well as other interested parties. The text of that speech follows below:

In late May, the world witnessed an extraordinary sequence of speeches and meetings involving US President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. These, together with commentary from official circles in both countries, did not make for an edifying interlude and lacked any display of farsighted statecraft or high moral courage. However, that is not to say that the week's display was not useful. In the end it enabled us to see that a fundamental change in the nature of the Israeli state has become inevitable.

**Obama's position**

Although it may seem mystifying in one so intelligent and insightful, Obama's mindset at the start of his administration was, perhaps, understandable. After all, the salient issues relevant to solving the Palestine/Israeli dispute had been reviewed endlessly over decades by all parties. On this basis, to this most logical, detached, and rational of men, the solution must have seemed obvious. All he needed to do was to get the negotiating process properly underway, by addressing the key impediment: Israeli settlement policy.

He understood that continued settlement was ultimately self-destructive for Israel and, if pursued to its logical conclusion, a 'fait accompli' would

be created on the ground thus ending any possibility of a two-state solution. Continued Israeli settlement building would provide endlessly seductive motivation for tactical delay to negotiations. Inevitably, the longer the Israeli delay and obfuscation, the more Palestinian willingness and political cover to engage in the process will be undermined, reinforcing the popular Palestinian conviction that the whole point is to mute their resistance and play them for dupes in an effort to gain time to complete Palestinian dispossession.

However, putting a permanent stop to the settlements changes the whole negotiating dynamic. Rather than being motivated to delay, the Israelis would be motivated to agree on permanent borders, so that they can continue building in legitimate areas. On the other hand, the Palestinians, reassured that there will be something in it for them, would be motivated to follow the process through, knowing that “until everything is agreed, nothing is agreed”.

Thus, Obama was right to focus on the settlements. However, in believing that he could then leave it to George Mitchell and his negotiating team to work out the details, surprisingly (as he had been a US Senator) he did not take into account the stance of the United States Congress, though others have long recognised Congress as a problem. I remember the words of the leader of a large leftist labour union: “I used to lead anti-American demonstrations to protest against support for Israel, but, in time, I began to understand it was pointless“. Raising his hands to grip his throat, he said: “The Israelis have the US like this”. What he was talking about was the US Congress.

### **A Hard Lesson for Obama**

So President Obama has come to learn a hard lesson – that is, in his quest to put pressure on the Israeli Government to stop further

settlements, he really never had a chance. The fact is that, at least since the 1960s, Israeli Prime Ministers have always had far more influence in Congress than any US President. Therefore, what real pressure could Obama ever hope to exert over Netanyahu? As soon as Netanyahu decided to resist, the game was over; and, humiliatingly, the President was forced to take whatever temporary “partial moratorium” the Israeli PM was willing to give him. From there, the route to the final failure of the George Mitchell project was a long, slow, downward spiral, leading to a muted crash.

### **Change of Approach from Obama?**

I was harshly critical of Obama’s 19 May ‘Arab Spring’ speech, particularly where Palestine was concerned. “Passive” I said, “a refusal to lead”. Thus when, in light of the perversely negative reactions to the speech from both the Israeli Prime Minister and his supporters in the US, one heard that Obama would be addressing the annual convention of AIPAC, the leading US pro-Israel lobby, three days later, I didn’t want to listen. One can stomach only so much compensatory pandering at a single go.

But I soon realised that I was missing the point. This President is too sagacious to make the same mistake twice. In fact, far from a simple exercise in pandering – although his speech to AIPAC was replete with it – the second of the presidential speeches in question, though quite consistent with the first, opened them both up to a different interpretation than I had first thought. Of course the President was not going to expose himself politically, yet again, to try to press peace on an unwilling Israel. He cannot. Instead, these two speeches should be seen for what they are: an attempt by Obama, insofar as politics will allow, to speak honestly with the Israeli people and all who support them. Taking the

role of a best friend setting out an uncomfortable truth, what Obama was saying was this:

*You Israelis have nothing to fear from me. My commitment, and that of the USA, to your security is unshakable. I will support you in every way I know how. We will ensure that you are to effectively counter any external enemy, even at the cost of our own security. We will resist, as best we can, all efforts to exert pressure on you in international forums, whether you are right or wrong. We will use all our influence on the Palestinians and on regional leaders, bribing and cajoling them, playing on their fear, anxiety and naïve faith in us to influence their actions in your favour. In short, I will do what all recent US Presidents have done, just as they have, and without fail.*

*But honesty and sincere concern for you compel me to speak the truth, as others have not. So please know that there is a way in which I cannot help. Neither I nor my country can save you from yourselves. If your dream is a Jewish, democratic state, you are on a path to self-destruction. The demographics of the Palestinian population increase west of the Jordan ensures this. The wave of non-violent popular resistance sweeping the Arab world will not bypass the Arabs in your midst. Soon you will confront far more acutely the internal moral dilemmas faced by all oppressors. The status quo is thus unsustainable for you and further delay in addressing it will not help. While you can continue to count on us, the rest of the world is already growing tired of your endless occupation. In the end, our support will not be enough to save you from international opprobrium, isolation and, ultimately, the essential failure of the Zionist enterprise.*

*You will get no more unwanted pressure from me. I can suggest a partial formula for a Palestinian settlement which I believe may work, if*

*you choose to consider it. We will continue to do all we can from the outside, but only you can make the fundamental decisions. Beyond that, you are on your own.*

That is the President's message, pure and simple. Once you understand that, you can see that virtually all the reaction and commentary surrounding it is utterly irrelevant. The President is not "pressing" Israel to do anything. He is offering judgments and advice, though he has made clear he will support the Israelis completely even if they ignore him. There is no "or else" either stated or implied, not even a passive one.

### **Political Reality**

I don't believe Obama sees an alternative to a two state solution in Palestine, but he knows he can do nothing more to achieve it. For all intents and purposes, the US led "peace process" is finished, even though the broader administration may sustain some sort of international dialogue, but that will be pure window dressing designed to diminish America's isolation.

No, the President's words of the past two weeks will not be recorded in the annals of high statecraft as they contain no grand appeals to high ideals and noble goals. However, they do record an acceptance of political reality, expressed with a degree of grace and principle. Even to do that much required some political courage, which at least should be recognised.

### **Reaction to Obama**

The rewards of Obama's high mindedness have come fast and furious. First, there was the angry response from Netanyahu to the President's

reference to the 5 June 1967 borders as a starting point for territorial negotiations with the Palestinians. Boarding a plane for the US the Israeli leader icily noted that he expected – expected, mind you – “to hear a reaffirmation from President Obama of American commitments made to Israel in 2004”. Of course, strong reaffirmations of Congressional support were forthcoming before the Israeli could even land, with even senior members of the President’s own party scrambling to distance themselves from Obama.

Obama is greatly peeved by this response, and rightly so. He never suggested an actual return to the 1967 borders – only their use as a reference point for agreed land swaps to accommodate Israeli settlement blocs. As such, these complaints from Netanyahu and his legion of US supporters are both disingenuous and politically mischievous.

### **The Netanyahu Version of Peace**

Netanyahu’s objection is not frivolous, however. The rationale behind it is worth exploring. Obama’s resort to the 1967 borders was not arbitrary. He referred to them because they provide a framework of international legitimacy for the negotiating process. They are enshrined in UN resolutions and set under the terms of a UN negotiated armistice in 1949. Any departure would require the mutual agreement of concerned parties if any degree of international legality were to be observed.

The reason Netanyahu rejects the 1967 borders is that neither he nor anyone else in the Israeli leadership cares a fig for international legitimacy per se. Recent Israeli governments have refused recourse to the 1967 borders as a reference point because they do not want to be constricted. Lurking behind this refusal is the knowledge that even if the major West Bank settlement blocs were absorbed into Israel proper,

there would still be some 80,000 to 100,000 Israelis who would be displaced, unless they choose to live in “Palestine”.

As Netanyahu said in his 20 May press conference with Obama, “for there to be peace, the Palestinians will have to accept some basic realities”. He then set out these realities before a joint session of the US Congress on 24 May, giving his “vision of peace”. No concessions on Jerusalem, no concessions on right of return, no restrictions on desired Israeli military deployments outside its territory, no negotiations with any Palestinian entity which includes Hamas, and no clear indications of what territory might ultimately be conceded to the Palestinians, except that they be based on reference points of Israel’s choosing. In short, if the Palestinians want peace, they will have to accept whatever Israel is willing to concede.

### **Reaction to Netanyahu**

The reaction of the US national legislature could have been anticipated. Shouting to be heard over a reception described as both “thunderous” and “delirious”, Netanyahu was forced to pause for 59 rounds of applause with 28 standing ovations during his 50 minutes speech.

Is there any wonder that Obama has walked away?

The fact that the US President’s eager critics, both in the US and Israel, are focusing on trumped up issues only serves to underscore the futility of what the President has tried to. It is not that the Israelis have rejected his message. Neither they nor their US supporters HAVE EVEN HEARD IT. The fact that Netanyahu and his aides have sought to reassure their countrymen that the unpleasantness between the two leaders has not weakened US support for Israel would be endearing, if it were not so

pathetic. Despite all Obama's efforts to warn them otherwise, they still think America can save them.

## **Changing the State of Israel**

Sooner or later, the truth will dawn. The first of a thousand cuts will come in September, when the UN General Assembly declares a Palestinian state. Consistent with his stated commitments to Israel, President Obama has disingenuously advised the Palestinians not to press this symbolic course, reminding them that it will not win them their state and warning against efforts to "delegitimize" Israel. What he most fears, of course, is the isolation and mortification which await him in New York, where he and the Israelis will stand, naked and alone, on the world stage. Of course, a UN resolution will not win the Palestinians a separate state. And the Palestinians do not have it in their power to delegitimise Israel. The point of pressing for UN action in September is merely to highlight the fact that the Israelis, in opting for consolidation of a "Greater Israel" over the dictates of a just peace, have delegitimised themselves.

Much of the world has long recognised and accepted that the permanent establishment of a secure Jewish state in a partitioned Palestine would necessarily involve grave injustices to Palestinians. Although there has come to be some general acceptance of reality on the ground, the world will not accept what Israel now clearly intends. The permanent occupation and subjugation of an indigenous population, eventually to be a majority. The US will perhaps rationalise this indefinitely, but the rest of the world will not, for the moral cost of doing so will simply be too high. Soon, Israelis will find themselves global pariahs, much as white South Africans were for a time.



It would be churlish not to feel empathy for those Israelis and their supporters who have been advocates of the rights of Palestinians and the necessity of a just peace. The specific dream of a democratic Jewish homeland, given passionate impetus by the unspeakable atrocities visited on Jews in the past century, has been undone by many decades of chauvinism, irredentism and strategic myopia on the part of leaders who have served them badly.

What is done is done, but it should also be stressed that there is an alternative vision. Rather than discriminating systematically against its Arab citizens, Israel has the opportunity to become a truly democratic, bi-national state, still capable of fulfilling the founding vision of a Jewish homeland, even if it no longer does so on an exclusive basis.

Perhaps one day, it is possible to even envisage an Arab Prime Minister and an Arab Chief of Staff for the Israeli military.

### **Israel's Growing Right Wing Views**

To say that there will be widespread resistance to this vision, is vastly to understate the case. An interesting and insightful view comes from a recent piece by Washington Post columnist Dana Milbank. In it he recounts bringing his daughter's 21-year-old Israeli au pair to hear Netanyahu's address to Congress. A moderate, secular, middle class young woman, she is frequently put off by the right wing aggressiveness of Netanyahu and the Likud and thinks settlement expansion is unwise. Though patriotic and highly distrustful of the Palestinians, she understands the reasons for their animus. "We did invade their home. You can't deny that". Like many in her generation however, she is cynical about peace knowing that the little Israel is willing to offer Palestinians in a two state settlement is a non starter, and yet even the

modest ideas put forward by Obama as the basis of a two state solution appear to her to pose an threat to her country as she knows it.

This is where decades of annexation and settlement have led the people of Israel. Deprived of apparent options, they sense there is no place to go, except deeper into a South African style laager, into a world of denial, belligerence, self-deception, fear and bluster. Perhaps precisely because Binyamin Netanyahu has done as much as anyone to bring them to this place, he appears to offer the only viable formula for dealing with it: My country, right or wrong.

To Milbank and many other US observers, the Israeli reaction to his words demonstrates that Obama has bungled. By even gently challenging the Israelis, they argue, he is driving them further to the right and away from peace. Better, they say, to reassure them. Faced with what promises to be growing external and internal pressures, Israel is likely to further lurch to the right. But their prescription is dead wrong, Israel will not save its soul by taking this approach. It is going to have to develop a radically new vision of itself, along with leaders who can articulate it. The process of doing so promises to be ugly; delay and the false reassurance of outsiders will not make it less so.

## **The Future**

Far from having blundered, President Obama has done what he can to bring clarity to the situation. For Israel, there is no going back. It will have to address, for itself, the question of its place in the world and most importantly, the status of the Arabs for whom it has now, permanently and willfully, assumed responsibility.

**END**

**SINNA MANI**

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For further information, please contact:

Sinna Mani: 07981 974237

Namrata Dhingra: 07708 737474