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Netanyahu calls Obama's bluff

By M K Bhadrakumar

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As tensions mount in the coming hours and days with the Israeli troops and tanks advancing toward Gaza menacingly, United States President Barack Obama begins to realize that he has a forked tongue.

Gaza becomes the litmus test of what he can claim to be as a statesman and what he cannot be in political reality.

For Obama, there is no running away from the reality that he has been hiding his head ostrich-like from the day he left Cairo in 2009 after making a magnificent speech there on the Palestinian problem.

The events of the past week in Gaza underscore that unless he musters the political courage - and integrity as a statesman - to address the Palestinian problem, all his talk of a transformative agenda for the Middle East remains sheer baloney.

Furthermore, his lop-sided priorities in the Middle East are getting exposure. In essence, he ends up being seen as cooking up tales about Syria and Iran and shying away from the one issue that can make all the difference for America's discourse with the Muslim world.

The Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has exposed Obama and is forcing a reset of their mutual equations even before the US president gets started on his second term in the White

House.

Obama can always take shelter behind mellifluous rhetoric and has no adverse domestic public opinion to grapple with. Nor is he being called upon by his European allies to be accountable.

The spanner in the wheel

The paradox is that the crisis in Gaza had to erupt just when things were looking up for a possible US-Egyptian reset, including a joint enterprise by the two countries to give a decisive push for "regime change" in Syria.

A technical team from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has been in Cairo for the past fortnight to negotiate a US\$4.8 billion loan that Egypt has sought to shore up finances. Even as the Israeli jets kept pounding Gaza relentlessly and Hamas beseeched Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi for help, the IMF announced on Wednesday, "The mission will remain in Cairo for a few more days to continue work and build on the good progress already made."

The IMF usually expects that governments take actual measures as per an agreed economic reform plan before signing off on loans, but Morsi knows exceptions can always be made, and it is Washington who decides.

Equally, from Obama's viewpoint, the flare-up in Gaza comes at a most awkward moment for his best-laid scheme for Syria in the coming months. After much effort spread over five agonizing days in Doha, the former US ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, and the former Syrian parliamentarian Riad Self somehow managed to cobble together a Syrian National Coalition (SNC) over the weekend.

Many a time it seemed Ford would fail to pull the rabbit out of the hat, and the Qatari hosts had to literally step in and blackmail some of the key figures in the Syrian opposition groups before they'd fall in line with the script Ford brought from Washington.

The urgency was clearly there. The formation of the SNC was a prerequisite for the forthcoming meeting of "Friends of Syria" in Tokyo where the "international community" would accord recognition to the Syrian opposition.

Morsi has been mollified, as Syria's Brothers have been given the lead role within the SNC. Also, Qatar and Turkey each extended US\$2 billion as aid for Morsi's government. The game plan is to have the SNC headquartered in Cairo. The Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu visited Cairo on Wednesday and talked things over with Morsi as to what is expected of him while Obama shifts gear on his transformative agenda on Syria.

Therefore, Netanyahu has literally thrown a spanner in the wheel and is all but acting as a spoilsport. The crisis over Gaza takes the focus away from the SNC and highlights all over again that the real battle line in the Muslim Middle East ought to be not on Syria at this juncture but instead on the Palestinian problem.

However, where Netanyahu would have intentionally hit Obama hardest is in terms of the latter's credibility to enter into one-on-one negotiations with the Iranian leadership. In his very first press conference on Wednesday after his magnificent election victory, Obama declared that he intended to "make a push in the coming months to see if we can open up a dialogue" with Tehran "to see if we can get this thing [nuclear issue] resolved."

Obama was manifestly conciliatory and claimed he wouldn't stand on "diplomatic niceties or protocol" and "if Iran is serious about wanting to resolve this, they'll be in a position to resolve it."

Now, if the Israeli troops march into Gaza, Obama will be seen in the entire Arab world as someone who makes empty promises. It suits Netanyahu at this point to be seen as calling the shots in the Middle East, since his alliance with Yisrael Beiteinu (Avigdor Lieberman's party) stands to gain in January's parliamentary elections. The hardline grouping panders to the prevailing popular mood in Israel in its championing of "Greater Israel".

An engrossing duel

Clearly, Obama has been compelled to fall back on the one-sided US policy of putting all the blame on Hamas for triggering the present crisis and by justifying Israel's "right to defend".

More fundamentally, however, this also has the potential to become an Obama-Netanyahu duel, which will impact the uncertain alchemy of their relationship through the US president's second term.

Obama may not like it that Netanyahu has hustled him, but then, as a realist he also has to factor in that the Republican-controlled House of Representatives in the US Congress will not brook anything other than 100% support to Israel in the present crisis.

Obama might as well say goodbye to his hopes to forge a consensus in the United States Congress to advance a second-term agenda that would go into the making of his presidential legacy - fiscal cliff, tax reform, immigration, energy and climate change, disarmament, etc - if he fails to pass the litmus test on support to Israel.

But this is exactly where he is going to run into a serious problem with Tehran. The point is, the centrality of the Palestinian problem in the regional policies of the Islamic regime in Tehran is not often fully grasped when facile conclusions are drawn that what motivates that country would be solely its (legitimate) claim to be accommodated as a regional power.

The regime in Tehran, like most of the Muslim world, has great sympathy for the Palestinians and finds the suppression in Gaza appalling and genuinely unacceptable.

Yet, all that Obama can do today is to urge Morsi to rein in Hamas. Suffice to say, Obama is making a grievous error by once again instinctively taking the pragmatic route of being seen walking shoulder-to-shoulder with Israel.

Influential sections within the Iranian establishment all along alleged that Obama is far too weak to negotiate meaningfully with Tehran on the nuclear issue. Besides, Tehran also harbors the suspicion that the real US agenda is to weaken Iran by imposing a Taif-model accord (as in Lebanon and Iraq) on Syria (which also enables Israel to regain its regional dominance.)

That is to say, Netanyahu may have smothered for the present whatever degree of optimism Obama generated regarding direct talks between the US and Iran. All in all, therefore, Obama finds himself on a spot even before his second term gets under way. Netanyahu has turned the tables on him for the slights administered by Washington in recent months.

There is no doubt that in one brilliant swipe Netanyahu has brought to the surface the profound contradictions in the US strategy on the Middle East question.