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Obama Submits to Israel Lobby

By Lawrence Davidson

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Editor's Note: President Barack Obama has begun to look toward what is likely to be a tough reelection fight in 2012, and the political strategists around him are making clear that he must jettison what's left of his modest reform agenda if he's to have a chance.

One of the first items over the side is any approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that might, in any way, upset the powerful Israel Lobby. So, Obama is calling in many of the "usual suspects" to reframe his policy in a way that won't make him a target of the Lobby, as Lawrence Davidson notes in this guest essay:

According to [Laura Rozen](#), a journalist specializing in foreign policy matters and writing in [Politico](#), the Obama administration is seeking "new ideas from outside experts on how to advance the [Israeli-Palestinian] peace process."

This is because President Barack Obama and his counselors are "utterly stuck" following the failure of last year's efforts to strong-arm Mahmoud Abbas and bribe Benjamin Netanyahu into negotiations.

Quoting an administration consultant, Rozen tells us "there is no pretense of progress. With the State of the Union coming up and the new GOP Congress, they [administration

officials] are taking a few weeks to regroup and solicit ideas to push forward and ... to give a real jump-start" to negotiations.

On the surface this would appear to be welcome news. The Obama administration has had this revelation that its process and those of its predecessors have all failed. So there is a need for some new, progressive thinking about peace in the Holy Land.

Maybe there should be a new approach that would play to the leverage the U.S. can bring to bear on both parties (and not just the Palestinians). But then Rozen proceeds (in a completely dead-pan style) to explain to us how the administration is going about its search for "new ideas from outside experts."

Two separate efforts have been set up to brainstorm these new ideas:

1. "One task force has been convened by Sandy Berger and Stephen Hadley." Who are they?

[Berger](#) was National Security (NSC) Adviser to Bill Clinton. He was a "prominent actor at the Camp David 2000 Summit."

How about [Hadley](#)? He was Assistant to Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz during George W. Bush's first term of office and then National Security Adviser to Bush during Bush's second term. In these positions he worked closely and comfortably not only with Wolfowitz but also men like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld.

2. "A second effort [is] led by Martin Indyk." And who is [Martin Indyk](#)?

Indyk served twice as U.S. Ambassador to Israel as well as being a member of the National Security Council under Clinton. Before that he was deputy research director for American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and served eight years as the executive director of the pro-Israel Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), which he helped co-found.

WINEP is supported by AIPAC. According to Rozen's report, one of the first things Indyk has done in his search for "new ideas" is to seek out, among others, "senior NSC Middle East/Iran adviser Dennis Ross."

And who is [Dennis Ross](#)? Ross was Bill Clinton's Middle East envoy in the 1990s. Before that he was on Ronald Reagan's National Security Council and, along with Indyk, helped co-found WINEP.

These are the people to whom the Obama administration is looking for new thinking about the peace process. One is left simply amazed at this development. Almost, but not quite, speechless.

For all these men, Berger, Hadley, Indyk and Ross are strongly biased in favor of Israel, and among the folks who have been running the U.S. side of the peace process at least since the 1980s. They are not "outside experts" at all. They are retreaded inside "experts" whose records, with very minor exceptions, in regard to the peace process, are ones of failure.

Going to these people for "new ideas" that will "jump-start" peace talks in the Middle East is like going to Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia for a forward-looking and progressive take on the U.S. Constitution. Such an effort is a standing contradiction. It is a rigged game designed to get you the opposite of what you claim to seek.

The unavoidable question is why is the Obama administration wasting its time and our money doing this?

The answer has to be first and foremost domestic politics. Although Barack Obama would, understandably, still like to make a positive impact on the Palestinian-Israeli impasse he is convinced that any effort in this regard must conform to the wishes of domestic political forces led by the Zionist lobby.

For instance, what would happen if he decided that all those listed above were hopeless failures and, instead of going to back to them, he was going to turn to, say, [Rashid Khalidi](#), the Edward Said Professor of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia University?

Khalidi is undoubtedly an expert on the Middle East and the Palestinian-Israeli question. However, he is also very much in favor of justice for the Palestinians. If President Obama was to consult Khalidi, there would be an immediate knee-jerk reaction in Congress consisting of quite literal screaming and yelling.

AIPAC would call Obama a man seriously lacking in judgment and Khalidi a friend of terrorists. The President's possibilities for re-election would, allegedly, recede dramatically. On the other hand, there is no doubt that he would get "new ideas" from an "outside expert."

The political pragmatist might argue, what good are "new ideas" if they cannot be implemented? But this position accepts the same assumption noted above, that any U.S. president *must* be tied down by the political power of the Zionist lobby.

It is, in fact, an assumption that *must* be challenged if any future progress is to be made.

Thus, the president should take a chance. He should consider making a new and forceful initiative and demand Israeli compliance like Eisenhower did at the end of the Sinai Crisis of 1956. He should go to the American people and explain what he is doing and why. He should use every presidential prerogative there is, including the negative ones, to assure Israeli cooperation.

Oh, this is political suicide, answers the political pragmatist, it will never work. But, as is obvious, nothing else has worked to date.

The United States is spending enormous sums to subsidize Israeli obstinance and, according to congressional testimony from Gen. David Petraeus, the man who leads the American effort in Afghanistan, doing so is helping to kill American soldiers. So, go ahead, Mr. President, take the bull by the horns already.

Alas, he will not. And Rozen's report is proof positive that the President will not do this. He is, first and foremost, a domestically oriented politician cut out of a very standard cloth. Politically, then, it has been judged safer to resurrect the dead in the form of Berger, Hadley, Indyk and Ross.

So, there you have it. What is necessary for success in the peace process is always assumed to equal political failure at home.

On the other hand, political success at home (which entails letting the Zionist lobby set the criteria for what is possible) equals continued failure of the peace process. It also equals ever-increasing danger for U.S. interests in the Middle East and Muslim world.

This latter equation is not based on an assumption. It is a historically demonstrated fact.

This is why we fail. No one wants to seriously test the old standing assumptions. Our political system is ossified. It is trapped in a lobby-driven, financially corrupt rut.

And until we find a way out of it, we are doomed to go around in circles. That is what the administration's pseudo effort at seeking "new ideas from outside experts" amounts to, going in a circle. Round and Round and Round and Round.....

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of [*Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America's National Interest; America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*](#); and [*Islamic Fundamentalism*](#).

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