

A Word of Advice from James Zogby: 'Arabs Should Act Now'

Contributed by James Zogby
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Act now, don't wait for Obama. James Zogby, the president of the Arab American Institute in Washington is right when he asks the Arabs not to wait for Barack Obama, but to act now. Zogby correctly points out that expectations across the Middle East will be so high of the new American president and the need for change so great that all eyes will be focused on him. The danger in such cases is that people will expect overnight miracles. When those fail to materialize, they will be disappointed and begin blaming the United States once again. This can be described as the "Florida woman syndrome."

The day after Obama's election, a woman in Florida rejoiced that she would no longer have to worry about paying her mortgage nor about the high price of gasoline for her car because Obama was elected president. This woman is about to have a very rude awakening. Obama may be willing to change much, but unless he receives the support of the people he is trying to help, change will be impossible.

Similarly, the region's leadership should not expect the problems of the Middle East to be solved overnight and without their active participation. Unless the Israelis and Palestinians, and the Syrians and the Israelis, and the Lebanese and the Lebanese get their acts together, with the very best intention in the world, Obama will not be able to put the pieces back together in the complicated geopolitical jigsaw puzzle that is the Middle East.

Rather, as Zogby points out, the Middle East leaders should make use of this critical transition period and begin laying the ground so as to facilitate the task for President Obama when he assumes office next January. Just as Obama is not wasting time and preparing his administration so that everything will be in place on Jan. 20, similarly, the parties concerned in the Middle East conflict must follow his example.

"The Palestinian house is in disarray, with leaderships in the West Bank and Gaza both physically and ideologically divided. Gaza, under the control of Hamas, is being strangled by an oppressive embargo, with an on-again, off-again truce punctuated by periods of rocket attacks and Israeli assaults," said Zogby.

Obama is committed to bring peace to the Middle East, but despite all the prestige and might of the United States of America, unless he gets the full cooperation of the parties concerned, he is unlikely to have greater luck than his predecessors.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks that Obama is likely to face in trying to mediate a peace treaty between the Arabs and the Israelis will be to get the Palestinians to agree among themselves and mend the ever-growing schism between the West Bank and Gaza, between Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority and the Islamists of Hamas.

The Arabs, as well as the Israelis, need to understand that "the mortgage" will still need to be paid on Jan. 21. If the two sides don't make an effort to help Obama help them, then, as Zogby points out, "the first priority must be to achieve Palestinian reconciliation."

Time is not a luxury that can be squandered.

Dr. James J. Zogby is founder and president of the Arab American Institute (AAI), a Washington, D.C.-based organization which serves as the political and policy research arm of the Arab American community.