

Obama Surpasses Clinton in Dealing with Syria

Contributed by Huda Al Hussein
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The Whitehouse vs. the State Department in dealing with Syria.

There is a crisis taking place in Iran and confusion in the United States. Before the elections in Lebanon, the US administration sent US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Vice President Joe Biden to Beirut. The main focus, by necessity, was to not allow Syria's allies to win as this would mean increasing the number of cards in Syria's hands with which it could pressure others.

Washington has learnt two lessons from the Palestinian experience; the first lesson was that Hamas's victory in the elections handed Syria a winning card and the second lesson was related to Mahmoud Abbas's loss of Gaza after Mohammed Dahlan's allegations and the war with Israel, which weakened the Palestinians dramatically and increased the number of cards in Syria's possession.

After the results of the Lebanese elections were announced, two schools of thought emerged in Washington with regards to how to deal with Syria. The first school of thought within the US Department of State believes that Syria must present tangible concessions regarding Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine before a US ambassador is sent to Damascus and that Syria must not get comfortable and continue to guess what steps the administration will take in its regard. The other school, the White House, feels that it needs Syria more than the State Department thinks. The White House is thinking more practically than the bureaucrats in the State Department.

A high-ranking American source talked to me about what was taking place, revealing that the White House is taking over the Syrian file. Three weeks ago, a source in the White House leaked news of Washington's decision to reinstate its ambassador to Damascus. What is surprising about the matter is that US President Barack Obama usually follows the strategy of not leaking news. So why has this strategy not been followed this time, as the State Department is forcibly pushing for negotiations with Syria, whilst the White House believes that it needs Syria in a number of countries.

My source confirmed that there really is some of kind of tension between the White House and the State Department and that Hillary Clinton has begun to feel that she is being marginalized to the extent that whilst she was delivering a speech on US foreign policy at the Council of Foreign Relations in New York after a long absence, the US President was talking to the Americans about his plans for guaranteeing healthcare.

Disputes between the White House and US State Department have gone further than [the issue of] reinstating an American ambassador to Damascus. Dennis Ross leaked news that what prompted the American president to take Ross from the State Department to National Security was Obama's feeling that the preparation for his trip to Saudi Arabia last month was insufficient. The White House denied this but sources from within the White House stated that Obama was hoping to convince Saudi officials to take some steps [regarding Israel] whilst Washington pressured Tel Aviv to stop the construction of settlements. The preparations for the trip did not include such proposals.

In her speech last Wednesday, Hillary Clinton said: "We know that progress toward peace cannot be the responsibility of the United States — or Israel — alone. Ending the conflict requires action on all sides... The Saudi peace proposal, supported by more than twenty nations, was a positive step. But we believe that more is needed."

The high-ranking US source said, "This is where Syria comes in. As for Ross coming to the White House, that is because he has influence on AIPAC and Congress, and his task is to strengthen Obama's position amongst Israel's allies in Congress, especially as Ross does not criticize Israel."

Obama's priorities: the US economy, guaranteeing healthcare and then the Middle East. He believes that if he accomplishes a positive breakthrough, this would have an influence on the Middle East. If he is successful economically in the United States and shows that he is a strong president, even AIPAC will reduce the pressure it applies.

The US president aspires to sort out the Middle East and provide the right atmosphere for Syria to return to the Arab world and this requires a comprehensive solution beginning in Palestine.

The US president was told by some that according to the Israeli mindset, if you occupy land you must maintain it. The US position expects that Syria will not oppose Palestinian-Israeli activity because there is no solution without Hamas, but would later agree to pay the price, i.e. acknowledging "the roadmap" (accepting the two-state solution but in a diplomatic manner).

“If Hamas wants to be part of the solution then it needs Saudi Arabia (its Islamic cloak) and Syria,” my source said. With the roadmap, Obama opened the door to Hamas. At the time, Hillary Clinton said that Hamas was rejecting the two-state solution. The source added, “Tom Pickering, the former Under Secretary of State [for Political Affairs] met with Mahmoud Zahar (Hamas’ Foreign Minister).”

My source reminded me that the current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is very much like the former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. When Sharon was the head of government, he always said that the real problem was Iraq, and Sharon did not want to give anything to the Palestinians. Today, Netanyahu repeats that Iran is the problem and that he does not want a solution to the Palestinians. Did Netanyahu feel that there can be no military operation with regards to Iran and that’s why he resorted to defying the US administration by safeguarding the continuation of settlement construction in Eastern Jerusalem, and so harassment began in south Lebanon? The Obama administration, which does not want to deal with Hamas, wants the construction of settlements to stop and for Palestinian and Syrian progress to begin. Rather, and this is what’s important, it wants to strengthen Mahmoud Abbas and his Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. It believes that when they are made stronger and there is an Arab coalition then that is when it will be possible to pressure Hamas.

My source questioned whether Syrian President Bashar al Assad is prepared to build ties with the Americans to win their trust.

If he wants to improve his ties with the Americans he must take measures regarding Hamas and Iran; that is, not sever its ties with Tehran but he “must recalculate.” For this reason the Americans are negotiating on the issue of reinstating their ambassador. Washington announced that it intended to do so, but it wants tangible steps taken by Syria first. It admits that these steps have already begun with the Lebanese elections [but] then it didn’t take long before a game of tug-of-war between the countries intensified and this was clear in the difficulty of forming a government in Lebanon.

My source admitted that Syria wants two things: ties with the United States on the condition that it supports the idea of regaining the Golan Heights, which is to be followed by US and European economic openness.

“The Syrians know that the key is in America’s hands and this is its chance. It is in Syria’s interest that Obama wants a solution to the Palestinian cause but the administration still feels that Syria is disrupting matters,” added the source.

But what is it exactly that America wants from Syria? It wants to strengthen Mahmoud Abbas and for Syria to give the indication that it does not always side with Iran, especially as Iran does not feel comfortable with Washington’s contact with Damascus, which coincided with the US withdrawal from major Iraqi cities, which will lead to complete withdrawal. Iran has one strategic ally in the Middle East: Syria. The withdrawal from Iraq reduces opposition to America. Therefore, Syria must once and for all commit to not interfering in Lebanon, explained the source.

What about Iraq? My source stressed that this is linked to Saudi Arabia’s position, but Washington has started to see that Iraqi President Nuri al Maliki is better than others.

I asked, “Has he become America’s man in Iraq?” The source answered that events that occurred revealed that he is the least closest to Iran [in comparison to others]; he is the best of the worst. If he goes who will be the alternative? Now Washington is putting pressure on him in order to come to power in partnership with the Sunnis, knowing that the Americans were in touch with the Baathists, and this is at the advice of Dennis Blair, the Director of National Intelligence. Blair said, “We must talk to our enemies,” and also called for opening up to Hamas and Hezbollah in order to distance these movements from Iran. He alluded to Clinton’s last speech to the Taliban in which she said that if it is fighting Al Qaeda then the US is with it.

No matter how long it will take, it is inevitable that Iran will be reached. I understood from my source that Obama cannot launch a war against Iran until conditions stabilize. He cannot embark on a war without negotiating the issue. War is difficult and costly and senior officers in the American army against the war are asking how can we not live with a nuclear Iran if we can live with a nuclear Pakistan, which is less stable than Iran?

The high-ranking senior source states that if there is a war against Iran Obama’s presidency will be over and it will mean that there is no peace process. An American war on Iran would mean entering a twenty-year battle with the Islamic world starting from Afghanistan and Iraq to Iran.

The CIA Director Leon Panetta visited Israel two weeks ago asking to see documents in its possession that confirm that Iran is producing a nuclear weapon. He requested that they [Israelis] do not rush into anything. This was followed by a similar request from Michael Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

On July 27, US Secretary of State Robert Gates will head to Israel along with George Mitchell, the Special Envoy for the

Middle East, for talks with Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak. Is it possible that one of them will talk about war and the other about peace?

There is no doubt that since the Iranian elections and the internal crisis that followed, (bearing in mind the possibility that this crisis might spill over beyond its borders), the US leadership and Israel, as well as Russia and Europe, will revise their policies towards Iran. With the continuation of this re-evaluation and the announcement that Israeli warships sailed through the Suez Canal recently, it is necessary to think about the fact that international policies review all the available options on the table in addition to their potential repercussions.

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