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Will Obama be good for Israel?

Menachem Wecker | Nov. 20, 2008

Israeli reactions on Obama run from fear to cautious optimism

Except for professions of unqualified support of Israel by both candidates, little was said specifically during the recent presidential campaign about the principle U.S. ally in the Middle East or about how each candidate might approach the seemingly intractable problems that would face a new administration.

Even though news cycles now are understandably overwhelmed by the deepening global financial crisis, the realities on the ground in Israel and its neighbors will inevitably demand the attention of the new president. The court of public opinion that president-elect Barack Obama will face in Israel is very mixed, running from skepticism to an assessment that considers his election ?a miracle.?

Part of that mix involves Christians, whose primary interests are the peace process and ending the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories.

Akiva Miller, 25, was used to following U.S. presidential elections from more than 6,000 miles away. But this year the Jerusalem native, who is studying law at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, is an exchange student at Georgetown University in Washington, and here he encountered a new type of political conversation with a different set of values.

?It?s plain to see that the economy, health care plans, and Iraq are the biggest issues for Americans, but also values issues like gay marriage, abortion, stem-cell research, and sex education seem to hold a uniquely big place in the elections,? said Miller, who started his own Hebrew blog, Democracy in America, on his time in Washington. ?For my family and friends in Israel, the biggest concerns are policy regarding Iran and the Middle East peace process.?

McCain was popular

Like many of his friends and family, Miller was excited by Sen. John McCain?s ?long and consistent record of

support for Israel? and his ?hard line? approach to Iran and nuclear proliferation. He considers Obama an unknown who reversed his statements about a unified Jerusalem as the Israeli capital, and questioned the meaning of Obama?s ?negotiations without preconditions? approach to Iran.

Miller might exemplify Israelis? deepening interest in American politics. ?The Israeli equivalent of Joe Six Pack can chat about Obama, McCain, and Hillary with a fair amount of knowledge and a great deal of emotional involvement,? said Elana Gomel, senior lecturer and former chair of Tel-Aviv University?s English and American studies department. ?We almost feel that this is ?our? election.?

Gomel, who divides her time between Tel-Aviv and California, said that Obama had a ?decisive edge? among secular Israelis (*hilonim* in Hebrew), while national-religious (*dati leumi*) and ultra-Orthodox (*haredim*) Israelis tended to support McCain. ?The issue of Iran is important but not overwhelmingly so. Rather, among the more right-wing Israelis there is the apprehension that Obama will take ?their? side, meaning the side of the Arabs and the Third World,? she said. ?However, Sarah Palin managed to scare off many moderate-conservative Israelis, some of whom are familiar with the Rapture theology and the uncomfortable centrality of Israel as the site of Armageddon in evangelical Christianity.?

Obama 'intelligent' but 'inexperienced'

According to Gerald M. Steinberg, chair of political studies at Bar Ilan University, many Israelis are also scared of Obama. Although he said Israelis perceive Obama to be ?very capable and intelligent? and hope he can restore American power and serve as an example of freedom to Arab countries like Iran, Steinberg said most Israelis also fear in Obama a ?repeat performance? of ?another inexperienced and naive American president,? Jimmy Carter, whose Middle East approach they reject.

?Israelis are more comfortable with McCain?s military background, his first-hand experience with the cruelties of warfare, and his realistic understanding of the threats from radical Arab and Islamic groups and leaders,? added Steinberg, who is also executive director of NGO Monitor, which promotes ?critical debate and accountability of human rights NGOs in the Arab Israeli conflict.?

Zvi Fine, 25, director of academic resources at The Jewish Statesmanship Center for Strategic Planning in Kedumim in Samaria, agreed that McCain would have been a far better option for Israel. ?I feel that the more liberal wing in Israel is past its peak, due to the public understanding of the terrible disaster that talking to enemies who have no intention of peace has brought upon Israel. Israel is one step ahead of America to some extent,? he said. ?The fact that all the Arab world is so happy with Obama?s victory shows this exactly.?

Eyal Beit-On disagreed. The editor of the Israel-based blog One Jerusalem is happy that Obama beat McCain, whose age he finds problematic, and Sarah Palin, who has ?a set of values taken from the Middle Ages.? But Beit-On said many Israelis supported McCain, whom they saw as a ?sure thing? in his ?more of the same? Middle East policy. ?He is a Naval Academy grad and an old army man, so that makes him good for Israel,? he said. ?The unknown here is Obama. Will Obama be good for Israel seems to be the million dollar question, and the papers and commentators in Israel ask it all the time.?

Beit-On said Israelis have a ?more than casual? interest in the U.S. elections and feels the U.S.-Israel relationship is ?historically close,? but he stressed the region?s political complications. Finding a steady partner in the ?foreign policy swamp/nightmare? and ?hot potato? region of Israel is ?a lesson that every U.S. president in the last 50 years has had to learn pretty much the first week on the job,? he said. But Beit-On is optimistic about Obama?s approach, especially his ?clean and green policy,? which in the long run could curtail Middle East?s oil regimes and could lead poor countries to better educate themselves and rid themselves of fundamentalism.

Other Israeli blogs, like Jerusalem 4 Obama, were more clear in their support for Obama. The blog quotes Rabbi M. Froman, chief rabbi (Orthodox) of Tekoa, a settlement in the West Bank in the northern Judean hills, who wrote of an Obama victory, ?I pray and await this very miracle.?

In another post, the blog?s author Lionel Wolberger, a Jerusalem-based engineer, defended Obama for repudiating pastor Jeremiah Wright and denounced Palin for not condemning her pastor and her church?s affiliation with Jews for Jesus. ?Obama can lead the U.S.A.; he can marshal its legions of talented people to continue to lead the world, as they have for centuries. They are the ones that will make all of us safe, sound and secure,? he concluded.

The Christians

But Catholic leaders in the Holy Land, who view themselves as Palestinians not Israelis, offered a different perspective on the U.S. elections. Jesuit Fr. David M. Neuhaus, who teaches scripture at the Seminary of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and is on the faculty at Bethlehem University, said that statistics on the Christian presence in Israel-Palestine are ?complex.? He estimated that 137,000 Christians live in Israel -- 10 to 12,000 of whom live as non-Israelis in East Jerusalem -- and another 20,000 live in the Palestinian territories. Of those, about 60 percent are Catholic, Neuhaus said, with most of the Catholics being Eastern Catholics, and a much smaller percentage being Roman Catholics. Only about 200 to 350 of the Catholics in the Holy Land speak Hebrew.

?With regard to positions on the American elections, I would imagine that most Christians here are most interested in what are the candidates? views on Middle East peace and on pressuring the peace process,? he said, adding that his ?wild guess? is that most Christians in the Holy Land support Obama.

Although he said that the U.S. elections attracted the whole world?s attention, Fr. Jamal Khader, chairman of Bethlehem University?s religious studies department, said the Christian community in the Holy Land is affected only by the occupation.

?If any candidate is willing to end occupation, he will have an impact on Christians,? he said. ?For me personally, and for many Palestinians, those elections do not have any interest; we don?t see any real difference between Republicans and Democrats. They may differ on many issues, as the campaign showed, but no difference is seen when it comes to the support to Israel and its policy.?

?The next president may think twice before declaring a new war,? said Khader, who is no Obama supporter but is glad the Bush era is over since he is tired of wars and threats. ?Is Obama less inclined to war and in favor of dialogue? The next four years will give the answer ... Will he make a difference? I am not sure, but I will pray that he would.?

(*Menachem Wecker is a freelance writer who lives in Washington.*)

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