

A View from the Bazaar

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The Arab Nations of the Middle East and other Muslim countries in the region may not be leading the world in science, technology or human rights, but they are certainly far ahead of the Americans and Europeans in the art of bargaining and they can detect a knife aimed at somebody's back, faster than anyone else. Everyone in the Middle Eastern bazaar is now carefully watching the Obama administration and its signals. Lebanon, Iran and Egypt were the scenes of three baffling messages. "Does he mean what he says?" ask the street vendors.

Lebanon is in the midst of a dramatic battle between pro-western groups and the Iranian funded and Syrian supported Hizbullah terrorist army. The former Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri, was clearly murdered by elements of the Iran-Syria-Hizbullah axis, while futile international attempts to personally identify the culprits continue endlessly. The only hope for the more enlightened Lebanese, currently led by Mr. Hariri's son, is the support, moral and other, of the West. In the midst of a hotly contested election campaign in Lebanon, when the results are hanging in the balance and Syria plays its usual negative role, the Obama administration finds the "right moment" to return the American ambassador to Damascus. The ambassador was recalled earlier, as a result of the Syrian involvement in numerous acts of terror in the region, including Hariri's murder. The act of sending him back was a sharp knife thrust deep into the back of the young Mr. Hariri. The Obama administration may not have intended to achieve such a result, but everyone in the Middle East, friends and foes of America alike, noticed its significance.

The Shiite majority in Iraq rightfully hopes to rule the country, after the American withdrawal. Their biggest fear is Iran, a powerful neighbor who fought Iraq for years, meddles in its affairs now, and would clearly like to dominate it and control it. There are small, but powerful, Iranian supported Shiite groups in Iraq, just waiting for the American retreat. They will then undoubtedly try, with substantial military and financial Iranian support, to take over Iraq. The Iraqi army was dismantled by the US and the preliminary attempts to retrain it are in an embryonic stage. The secular Iraqi Shiite majority has been watching carefully, with great expectations, the popular revolt and the street demonstrations in Iran, a first serious challenge to the Ayatollahs regime. The fact that the Obama administration avoided taking a stand, regarding the events in Iran, sent a clear chilling message to the Iraqis, essentially saying: "When you fight the Iranian stooges, after the American withdrawal, no one is going to help you". This is a devastating message, sent at the wrong time, in the wrong way, probably without intending to do so. It also demoralized the Iranian opposition. The Obama administration could not have done much for them, but statements of sympathy, support and encouragement could have gone a long way. When you are a lonely street fighter against all odds, a powerful distant supporter is precious, even if he provides only words. This is especially true in a region of the world where words often replace reality. The American lack of comment was not lost on both Iraqis and Iranians. The Gulf States must have also been alerted to the implications, in view of Iran's explicit overtures to control Bahrain and its less overt attempts to undermine other Gulf States.

Obama's famous Cairo speech to the Arab world included several courageous statements. But he stumbled badly when, after discussing the Holocaust and denouncing its denial, he proceeded immediately to say that the Palestinians have "also" suffered. The fact is correct. They indeed suffer, predominantly thanks to their own Arab brothers, their own deeds and the U.N. which keeps them in refugee camps for three generations, while they continue to demand the destruction of Israel. These issues may be debated endlessly. What cannot be debated is the absolute insensitive comparison. One can logically and factually state that "The Atlantic Ocean is full of water. My bath tub is also full of water". But these two correct sentences, put together, create an absurd combination. Comparing the sufferings of the Palestinians to the sufferings of the Germans, who remained devastated as a result of the war which they started and lost, might perhaps be appropriate, although not politically wise. But comparing the biggest crime in human history to a conflict which, by the standards of the Muslim world, led to moderate casualties, sufferings and displaced persons, is an exact analog to our grotesque "ocean and bath" statement. In 100 years of the Arab Israeli conflict, including 10 rounds of bitter fighting, the number of Palestinian war casualties is one hundred times (!) smaller than the number of Jews intentionally murdered by the Nazis in a short period. More Egyptians were killed in these wars than Palestinians, but Egypt made peace with Israel while the Palestinian-Hizbullah axis still attempted terror attacks within Egypt, just before Obama's speech. The total number of all Palestinian refugees in a century is smaller than the number of Pakistani refugees caused by Islamic terror in the last few months alone. The damage suffered by the Palestinians in all these wars, is much smaller than the sufferings of Iraqis in the long war with Iran, and we did not even mention Darfur. One can argue back and forth about the Palestinians, but to imply that their suffering is somehow rated higher than that of Egyptians, Pakistanis, Iraqis, Sudanese, Afghanis and Israelis is ludicrous. The inappropriately coupled twin statements of President Obama about the Holocaust and ("also") about Palestinian suffering, sent a clear signal of incitement to the radical Arab world and an extremely insensitive message to the Jewish world.

Add to the above three items the simple fact that President Obama already visited Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and more than a dozen other countries, while pointedly avoiding Israel, and you see a consistent pattern, visible to anyone in the Middle East: "If you are a friend of the United States, expect to be abandoned. If you are a foe, expect to be courted".

It is difficult to tell whether these moves are deliberate or they result from pure incompetence. In either case they will backfire. If the deliberate purpose is appeasement of terrorists and their supporters, at the expense of regional allies, it will only increase the appetite of the terrorists, who will not stop short of trying to destroy all friends of the West in the area. Israel can defend itself, but free Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain may not be able to do so. At some point, the appeasement will need to stop and the hatred to the US will grow stronger than ever, this time mixed with contempt. If this array of events is caused by sheer inexperience and incompetence, it is time for President Obama to start rethinking and listening. Praying is not enough.

At the time of this writing, if you are declared by the United States to be a terrorist organization, or if you fund such organizations or openly host their headquarters, prepare for an offensive of roses from the Obama administration. If you are an ally, prepare for daily leaked headlines about your conflicts and disagreements with the Obama administration. Any street vendor in a Middle Eastern bazaar knows how to read these signals. His merchandise is then priced accordingly.