

Middle East Wish List for Obama

by Patrick Seale, in „Middle East Times“ March 09, 2009¹

Zusammenfassung:

Der britische Nahostexperte Patrick Seale berichtet in dem Internet-Portal „Middle East Times“ über die vom „NATO Defense College“ in Rom am 4./5. März durchgeführte Konferenz mit Teilnehmern aus dem Nahen Osten, den USA und Europa. Auch wenn die arabischen Erwartungen an den US-Präsidenten Barack Obama von denen der israelischen Teilnehmer abgewichen seien, fasst der Autor die arabischen Forderungen an Washington sieben Punkten zusammen. Zu ihnen habe die Aufforderung gehört, dass die USA ihre Zurückhaltung gegenüber einer Koordination der syrischen mit der palästinensischen Verhandlungsebene aufgeben und israelischen Militäroperationen Einhalt gebieten sollten. Die Zerstörung des Iraks durch die USA hätte die regionale Balance zugunsten Irans verändert, das heute als regionaler Rivale Israels und der Vereinigten Staaten auftrete und den arabischen Nachbarn – Seale nennt insbesondere Saudi-Arabien, die Golfstaaten, Libanon und Ägypten – Sorge bereite. Außerdem würden sich die Araber eine atomwaffenfreie Zone in der Region wünschen, die auch Israel einschließe. Ein regionales Gleichgewicht sei am ehesten geeignet, den Frieden zu wahren.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has made a good start in the Middle East with her recent tour. She reaffirmed American commitment to a two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; she frowned on Israeli house demolitions in East Jerusalem; she announced the start of a dialogue with Syria; and she invited Iran to an international conference on Afghanistan.

These moves point to some radical new thinking in Washington after the catastrophic blunders of the George W. Bush years. They have aroused great – perhaps too great – expectations in the region. The Arabs, in particular, are now looking for U.S. President Barack Obama and his secretary of state to move from words to acts.

¹ Patrick Seale is a leading British writer on the Middle East and the author of „The Struggle for Syria“, „Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East“, and „Abu Nidal: A Gun for Hire“. Courtesy of „Middle East Times.“

What do the Arabs want from Obama? This was a major theme at an international conference held at the NATO Defense College in Rome on March 4-5, attended by participants from the Middle East, the United States and Europe.

Inevitably, Arab expectations from Obama were at variance with those of the Israeli delegates. But the conference was a useful exercise in mutual enlightenment.

The conference heard that Arab demands from Washington could be summed up as follows:

- The United States should spell out in detail its vision of an Arab-Israeli peace settlement, and declare that it was determined to resolve the conflict, not simply to manage it.
 - The U.S. goal should be a comprehensive peace: That is to say, there should be coordinated movement on both the Syrian and the Palestinian tracks. Any attempt to promote an Israeli-Syrian peace while relegating a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to a later date was bound to fail. Equally, focusing on the Palestinian track to the neglect of Syria was a recipe for failure. Although simultaneous movement on the two tracks might prove difficult, it had to be recognized that neither could reach closure without the other.
 - The United States should overcome Israel's well-known reluctance to negotiate with both the Palestinians and Syria at the same time. It should use its considerable leverage to bring Israel to the negotiating table – in much the same way as former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker managed to compel a reluctant Yitzhak Shamir, then right-wing prime minister of Israel, to attend the 1991 Madrid peace conference.
 - The United States should insist on an immediate and total freeze of Israeli settlement expansion on the occupied West
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Bank. Without such a freeze, any Palestinian-Israeli negotiations would be futile.

- The United States – together with the European Union, Russia and the United Nations – should play an active role in talks on both tracks. Turkey might also play a useful role. These outside parties, with the U.S. in the lead role, should stimulate negotiations, arbitrate between the parties, monitor implementation of agreements reached, and be ready to provide security guarantees if these are needed. The Palestinians and Syria should not be left to face Israel alone, since the imbalance of power is simply too great for a satisfactory conclusion to be reached.
- The United States should rein in Israeli militarism, rather than unleash it, as the Bush administration had done – against Lebanon in 2006, against Syria's alleged nuclear facility in 2007, and most recently against Gaza this past December and January. In particular, Washington should firmly prohibit any Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear facilities.

What is the background to this last demand?

The destruction of Iraq by the United States has overturned the regional balance of power to Iran's advantage. Iran has emerged as a regional rival to both Israel and the United States. Israel, in particular – in spite of its own vastly superior nuclear capability – regularly depicts Iran's nuclear program as an "existential threat," which must be eliminated by force, if necessary.

Most of Iran's Arab neighbors are undoubtedly concerned at the rise of Iran. A key debate in the Arab world today – in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Lebanon, Egypt – is how to contain and accommodate Iran's rising influence. But any such worries are dwarfed by the fear of an Israeli strike against Iran, which could be catastrophic for the Arab Gulf states, as they would find themselves in the line of fire. Indeed, an Israeli-Iranian military clash could trigger a regional war and be devastating for Arab, American and Israeli interests.

- The Arabs dream of a nuclear free zone in the Middle East – an improbable outcome in view of Israel's determination to be the region's sole nuclear power. But short of general nuclear disarmament, the Arabs would like the United States to embrace the goal of a regional balance of power, rather than guaranteeing Israel's military edge over any Arab combination. The argument is that a balance of power keeps the peace, whereas an imbalance causes war, since the stronger power will always seek to impose its will by force on its weaker adversaries – as the Gaza war has demonstrated only too clearly.
