

Remarks of Rob Prince, Summit County Unitarian Universalist Church, Copper Mountain, Colorado. Sunday November 22, 2010.

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New Directions In US Foreign Policy on Israel and Palestine?

I must admit that this is a date, when, 46 years ago, my sense of security about the world was shattered and, for the first time, questions about how the American political system worked arose in my mind that have never since been satisfactorily answered. It was on a Friday afternoon; I was puzzling over - the once again - poor results of a Physics lab from the day before at St. Lawrence University when someone from a neighboring dormitory room burst into my room with the news that President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. The messenger - had a history of being a practical joker. I got angry and it was only when I saw the tears flowing down from his face that I realized,...as my daughters used to say...`this is for reals`.

As a 19 year old college student - not very good at Physics I must admit - John Kennedy's presidency was about two issues that concerned me - Civil Rights and Nuclear Disarmament. As a freshmen in October of 1962, I remember another college scene, sitting by the radio with other freshmen during the Cuban Missile Crisis, discussing whether we should study for an exam the next day if there was going to be a nuclear war - I didn't and flunked - ; as for Civil Rights, ours was not what I would call `a political household` but I can tell you this, that growing up, I never heard a racist epithet out of the mouths of either my mother and father and on questions of what

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was then called 'The Arab-Israeli Conflict' - my mother, who died a few months ago at the age of 90 with Alzheimers - would respond to the increasingly tense discussions about the Middle East, with her life long standby 'We're all human ..`them and us'.

I haven't had much enthusiasm for an American president since...

But when Barack Obama began to gain on Hillary Clinton in the polls, like many Americans, my curiosity was picked and even an old cynic like me, was hopeful, even if I didn't admit it to my daughters. Obama's political victory was not only against the Bush 'program' - domestic and foreign policy, it also - as well you know - shook up the Democratic Party. It wasn't supposed to happen. Hillary and Bill Clinton had spent years building for a Hillary presidential run - and whatever else one can say about the Clintons, they are bright and about as sophisticated political operatives as our country has had these past decades. It was hard to believe that anyone could stop Hillary.

Here in Colorado what might be called 'the political class' of the Democratic Party, a good part of its leadership and state functionaries, lined up early and solidly behind Clinton. This was in tandem with national trends. That a first term senator from Illinois, with a Kenyan father and a corn-fed white mother from Kansas, could have defeated 'the Clinton machine' - still must rank as one of the great populist moments in American history. It spoke for where the country was at, at the time - capsulized in a vague but powerful motto - 'Time for a change'...

Although it is already forgotten to many, one of the key reasons that Hillary lost the Democratic Party nomination and Obama won, had to do with U.S. Middle East policy. Hillary could not separate herself - until it was too late - from the Bush Administration's Iraq War. She had also made a rather ridiculous speech - that President Bush or Prime Minister Netanyahu could have made - that she would be willing to use nuclear weapons against Iran. On the Israeli-Palestinian issue, again, she represented essentially a continuation of Bush policies.

In taking these positions, Hillary Clinton - whom I once heard on the CU Boulder campus in 1992 - give one of the best speeches in favor of a single payer healthcare system - was simply following the positions of what is called the Democratic Leadership Council - a few notches to the left of center on domestic policy; several notches to the right of center on foreign policy. Democratic candidates had been told - nay it had been drummed into them - that no candidate for public office could win if they took strong positions on peace and that on foreign policy issues, especially the Middle East, supporting an anti-war, peace position was political suicide.

But it was Hillary's hawkish positions that turned out to be 'political suicide'. And if Obama was able to outflank her, it was because he read the mood of the country - and of the Democratic Party nationally - much more clearly than she did and on Middle East policy that included the following:

1. A clear *national* opposition to the US invasion of and occupation of Iraq and the unspeakable damage the US war had done against that country...and that it was not about weapons of mass

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destruction, about saving the Iraqi people from Saddam - but a simple brutal oil grab and effort to place permanent US military bases in that strategically located, oil rich country and this done by an administration that tried to legalize torture and whose policies, according to some reputable accounts caused the deaths of as many as a million Iraqis.

2. On Iran - the American people were not so clear cut - since the 1979 hostage seizure - Iranian-US relations have known a considerable chill, it has been rather easy to vilify the Islamic leadership of that country especially since Ahmadinejad became president...However - many noted that Iran's nuclear energy program was not that much different than that of many 'developing countries' and that the 'warning' that Iran was developing nuclear weapons were inconclusive, the bottom line being, that with the US bogged down in Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian 'peace process' building more settlements than peace and Afghanistan festering that attacking Iran did not enjoy much support - this despite an all out *bipartisan* war-mongering campaign against that country. And as for Hillary's suggesting - pandering to AIPAC and similar types - that the US should 'nuke Iran' - It is my speculation that these comments, as much as anything, cost her the nomination. We already had one idiot in the White House; the American people didn't need - nor want - another one.

3. That brings us to Israel and Palestine - here, the differences between Hillary and Obama during the campaign at least, were much more muted. Both of them genuflected to Israel. At an Obama rally in Detroit, several Palestinian-American women, Obama supporters were actually forced off the podium to avoid the tv cameras.

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- Both Hillary and Obama spoke about 'reviving Oslo' - which was already long dead
- Both were silent about Israel's 2006 unsuccessful foray into Lebanon; \
- Even after he had won the presidency in 2008 - but before he took office - Obama said nothing - or nearly nothing - as Israel was mercilessly pounding away at Gaza, committing what more recently the Goldstone Report - to which we shall return - would define as Israeli war crimes against the Palestinian population there.

My take on Obama's Middle East stance as he came into office - was of very cautious and modest optimism, that there might be *some* progress on extracting the US from Iraq, but I feared those US bases in the country - some the size of medium US cities - the ones that were called 'non-permanent' were indeed permanent; on Iran that the worst of the rhetoric would moderate some *but that the basic policy of sanctions and of political subversion would continue*; and on Israel-Palestine that there would be little or no progress.

The problems of letting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict fester though are many:

1. On a humanitarian level it meant that the Israeli Occupation of the 1967 Territories - the longest military occupation in modern history - and easily, one of the cruelest, would continue. It takes different forms in the West Bank and Gaza, but in both places - as defined by international law, remains an occupation.

2. That Israeli settlement building in East Jerusalem and the West Bank - illegal under

international law would continue, each day undermining the viability of a two state solution that would insure Israel's security within its 1967 borders on the one hand and lead to the creation of a viable Palestinian state on the others. That solution, around which there has been an international consensus since 1967, is fast slipping away.

3. The growing anti-American sentiment in the Middle East - as a result of two occupations - the US occupation of Iraq, and the US-backed Israeli occupation of Palestine is more and more threatening US strategic interests in the region - again, which center around the control of oil and natural gas production. To settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would strengthen US relations with that region; not to risks endangering those interests, which I would argue are far more important than US ties with Israel. And to cut to the chase - the US cannot improve its relations with its Arab oil producing allies without resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This has been the case for a long time.

Still, I was surprised - and pleased - with the initiatives that Obama took - verbally at least - first in Ankara Turkey and then on June 4, 2009 in Cairo, Egypt - both to address and improve US-Moslem relations in general, and the way that he spoke about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and US-Arab relations in specific. And I should like to quote from that part of his Cairo speech

“The second major source of tension that we need to discuss is the situation between Israelis Palestinians and the Arab World. America's strong bonds with Israel are well known. This bond is unbreakable. It is based upon cultural and historical ties, and the

recognition that the aspiration for a Jewish homeland is rooted in a tragic history that cannot be denied”

“Around the world, the Jewish people were persecuted for centuries, and anti-Semitism in Europe culminated in an unprecedented Holocaust. Tomorrow, I will visit Buchenwald, which was part of a network of camps where Jews were enslaved, tortured, shot and gassed to death by the Third Reich. Six million Jews were killed, more than the entire Jewish population of Israel today. Denying that fact is baseless, ignorant and hateful. Threatening Israel with destruction - or repeating vile stereotypes about Jews - is deeply wrong, and only serves to evoke in the minds of Israelis this most painful of memories while preventing the peace that the people of this region deserve’.

I would say that I agree with what I would call ‘the thrust of these remarks’. Of course they are not new; we have been hearing them for years. What is new - really unprecedented for an American president - no American president has publicly stated the issue in this manner in modern times - is what followed:

“On the other hand, it is also undeniable that the Palestinian people - Muslims and Christians - have suffered in pursuit of a homeland. For more than sixty years they have endured the pain of dislocation. Many wait in refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza and neighboring lands for a life of peace and security that they have never been able to lead. They endure the daily humiliations - large and small - that come with occupation. So let

there be no doubt: *the situation of the Palestinian people is intolerable. America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspirations for dignity, opportunity and a state of their own.*

The statement goes on, calling for support of what is referred to as the Arab peace process, otherwise known as the Saudi Initiative of 2002.

Yes, there were some things 'missing' from this statement to be sure from my perspective. I believe that support of UN resolutions, especially Security Council Resolution 242, 338 and UN General Assembly Resolution 194 - need to be repeatedly mentioned because they form the basis of *international law* on this Israeli-Palestinian conflict around which an international consensus has long been built.

But having said that, I do believe the cynicism with which some of my friends on the left attacked Obama's Cairo speech is misplaced. The vision laid out by Obama in Cairo - at least in some of its aspects, represents a new opening, the beginning of an attempt to shift US policy both towards the Middle East in general and towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in specific on a new footing. And for that - for simply 'stating' a new policy - he is far from implementing it - Obama received an answer from the world at large - the Nobel Peace Prize.

I am not so naive to think that a simple speech or two has changed US Middle East and/or US Israel-Palestine policy. The facts on the ground continue to deteriorate. Israel continues - despite

US insistence for a freeze - to build settlements. Gaza - remains the modern version of the Warsaw Ghetto. Israel today has perhaps the most rightwing, militarist government in its history with an openly fascist - and that is not a word I use often or lightly - foreign minister - Avigdor Lieberman. The Palestinian movement remains hopelessly split and paralyzed. Unfortunately the United States has almost gleefully - and against its better interests and judgement - participated in dividing the Palestinian movement.

All this is true and worse if we are honest.

But that said,...

Let us remember the other side, the side of hope...

- Obama's commitment to change US policy - some of us have worked for 40 years to hear an American president publicly articulate that position. His Cairo speech is the peace movement's vindication - a small but significant one, that it is our ideas, our vision - so slandered and attacked for so long, *that have become where they belong - mainstream US policy.*

- a renewed interest in the Israel-Palestine conflict 'at the grass roots' here in America. It is not just at the Copper Mountain Unitarian Universalist Church that voices often ignored, sometimes repressed - fresh voices are being heard. It is happening all over the country

- the growing political maturity of Arab and Palestinian Americans in addressing this issue.

- the development, young and yet uncertain - but still growing - of Jewish organizations who reject AIPAC's blind support of Israel and who speak out, publicly and frequently against the Occupation - J-Street, Rabbi Michael Lerner, B'rit Tzedek, Jewish Voice For Peace

A few days ago, I turned 65, a fact which in some ways surprised even me. 42 years ago, I had thought, after the 1967 war ended - a war I watched from my vantage point in Tunis, Tunisia where I was a Peace Corps Volunteer - that this issue of Israel-Palestine would be settled - along the framework developed by the United Nations - in five, at the most ten years. How painful it is to see how little progress has been made since, how much human suffering has ensued; how much continues at present.

And frankly, I am not sure that the issue will be resolved in my lifetime.

But I will tell you this - that for my wife, for my daughters, for my Palestinian friends, for Israelis like Uri Avnery and Menachem Klein who signed the Geneva Accord, for the memory of Rachel Corrie and for the memory of my mother who believed 'we are all human' - and for simple human decency - I will continue to work for an Israeli-Palestinian peace with justice.

And unlike in the past - today I am no longer alone in this struggle, and haven't been for some time.

US Israel-Palestine policy must change, it will change. Propelled by the common decency and spirit of humanity of the people of this country - the same open spirit that elected Barack Obama

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president, the spirit that worked to end racism in America in the 1950s and 1960s, that..with a little help from the Vietnamese ended that horrible massacre called the war in Vietnam which some of us have not forgotten - as it has done in the past, that same spirit will move those in power in this country to work for an end to the Occupation and Israeli-Palestine peace... And among these fine folk, as they have been throughout American history, will be Unitarian - Universalists.

I thank you.