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Israel is unlikely to yield

George Hishmeh

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Top aides of the Obama administration have this month been quietly stoking the remnant coals of the peace process, raising expectations that the US president, whose popularity remains relatively high, may now be willing to go beyond gently rapping Israel's knuckles.

The ball started rolling when Barack Obama's national security advisor, General James Jones, addressed the fourth annual gala of the American Task Force on Palestine on 15 October.

"The president is committed to achieving two states, Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side in peace and security," he began, adding, much to the delight of his large audience, "Make no mistake about that". He also stressed that Obama was not going to wait until the end of his administration to do something about Palestine. This is "a clear priority", Jones said. "The president is personally committed to this goal because he believes that peace is in America's interests, just as it is in the interests of the Palestinian and Israeli peoples."

A week later, Susan Rice, US ambassador to the United Nations and a close confidant of Obama, told the Israelis face-to-face that it is not enough just to pay "lip service" to peace and urged the government to immediately revive negotiations, without preconditions, aimed at establishing an independent Palestinian state. She was speaking at a conference in occupied Jerusalem hosted by Israeli President Shimon Peres.

In contrast to these two encouraging statements, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton put a dampener on the mood, reporting to Obama that "challenges remain". She did not dwell on the details, but promised "to work with both sides to re-launch negotiations". Taking a step in this direction, she will for the first time as secretary of state travel to Israel for a meeting

on Sunday with hardline Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, after she attends a meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Morocco.

At his second opportunity this month to publicly discuss the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, General Jones maintained that the Obama administration's "commitment to Israel and peace is as strong as ever in the face of the many challenges in the region". Much to the delight of the unexpectedly large audience, which included several congressmen, at the first annual conference of the self-described "pro-Israel pro- peace" group, J Street, which has been shunned by the Israeli lobby and the Israeli ambassador in Washington, Obama's influential national security adviser declared: "If I could advise the president to solve one problem among the many, this would be it. This is the epicentre, where we should focus our efforts."

Obama will have a chance to do just that next month when he addresses the United Jewish Communities General Assembly in Washington, a conference that Netanyahu will be attending (it is not yet certain that the two will meet). Despite all this activity on the peace front, the outlook is far from rosy. For a start, the standing of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has been severely weakened as a result of his willingness, reportedly in response to US and Israeli pressure, to shelve the Goldstone Report on the war in Gaza.

More significantly, the right-wing Israeli government continues to be disinterested in an early peace settlement, certainly during Obama's first term. Israel's vice prime minister and minister for strategic affairs, General Moshe Yaalon, spelled out Israel's "refurbished negotiating posture for a Palestinian state" during a visit last week to Washington. In a column published on Monday, Arnaud de Borchgrave, editor-at-large of *The Washington Times* and of United Press International, summed up the Israeli view: "The Nobel Peace Prize will not help Mr Obama's quest for an independent homeland for the Palestinians by the end of his first term. Even if re- elected, the geopolitical prize would probably elude him again."

The new Israeli posture, as explained to de Borchgrave, is that "key topics like final borders, the return of refugees, the dismantling of Israeli colonies, the status of Occupied East Jerusalem, a security fence along the Jordan River against terrorist infiltrators from Jordan 'all would be postponed sine die.'" All this because the Palestinians refuse to recognise Israel as a "Jewish" state.

Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the former UN secretary-general, told the columnist that Israel's shenanigans will lead to "a one-state solution... probably [in] 10 years". Maybe Obama should lie low.