



What kind of Middle East awaits Obama

Seminar given by HE. Prof. Kamel Abu Jaber

President of the Jordan Institute for Middle Eastern Studies

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“The new US President Barak Obama is changing the image of western politics everywhere in the world and in particular in the Middle East. But will he be able to deliver? How much can he actually do given the present state of affairs and the onerous legacy of his predecessor?”, asked Kamel Abu Jaber opening his speech at a seminar organised at the Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome on 9 April 2009.

A former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Jordan and now President of the Jordan Institute for Middle Eastern Studies, Abu Jaber has passed through some of the most dramatic phases of what he has defined as the “terrible struggle” which is still raging in the Middle East. This struggle entails a fierce competition for resources and strategic positions among different actors, including the States of the region, non-State actors, and foreign stakeholders. This is the situation in which Obama comes in. Abu Jaber believes that there is space for cooperation for the sake of stability and peace in the Middle Eastern region. Nevertheless, much will depend on Obama’s ability to deliver in the framework of constraints and opportunities he faces both at home and abroad.

According to Abu Jaber, one of such constraints is the overwhelming power of the Zionist lobby in dictating the terms of American foreign policy. He also emphasised that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains the main source of insecurity in the whole region, pitting one population against the other and undermining the prospects of development. Abu Jaber publicly condemned what he regards as a sign of “the extreme reluctance, and often open opposition, towards the solution of the conflict showed by the manifold Israeli governments which followed one another over the years”. However, he added that “this conflict has become an Arab-Israeli conflict and a Western-Israeli conflict since Palestine is a mere excuse to cover the inability of the Arab States to react against the existing situation”.

Overall, he was sceptical about the prospects of the peace process due to the conflicting dynamics that are taking place within the Palestinian political establishment and are far from being conducive to peace and stability. In particular, the struggle between Fatah and Hamas is playing a crucial role in the definition of the balance of power between the Israeli and the Palestinian forces. In this context three different scenarios can be envisaged. Hamas may retain its political power and remain attached to its strong anti-systemic ideology. Or it may accept to come to an agreement with Mahmoud Abbas based on some forms of power-sharing. However, the most likely scenario depicted by Abu Jaber can be described as a sort of “illicit relationship between Hamas and Fatah: they could continue to talk as if there is something which can be hoped for without seriously engaging to reach a final compromise”.

In conclusion, this is the Middle East which is awaiting Obama. All the eyes are fixed on his next moves. Abu Jaber warned the audience that “too much uncertainty remains. If his attempts fail, then the only alternative left is Hamas, the Taliban, or something similar with a different name”. (Silvia Colombo)