

What's Love Got To Do With It

Bernard Avishai

I

President Obama is getting nearly as much advice about Israelis as about puppies, and at times the advice seems eerily the same: we want them close, but they can get too scared, or wild, or selfish; we cannot indulge their ferocious instincts or territorial overreaching-- anyway, they'll need some leashing in. "[Tough love](#)," writes the *New York Times*' Roger Cohen, and this counsel--these very words--have been repeated (by my count) by five other prominent journalists and diplomatic hands in recent weeks.



The people offering this advice are thoughtful, even brave, given how tender (or wary) presidential love of Israel has been since Ronald Reagan took office. But I fear the advice is out of date, and not only because of Gaza. There are three implied premises here. If the new Middle East envoy, George Mitchell, buys into them, he'll just give us more of the same.

THE FIRST PREMISE is that U.S. intervention is for the purpose of facilitating a negotiation between the interested parties, Israelis and Palestinians, so that we can finally arrive at a deal. The second premise, closely related to the first, is that America is a disinterested party: a kind of Dr. Phil, strong and well-intentioned, to be sure, but a mediator who--how did former Secretary Powell put it?--"cannot want peace more than the parties themselves." The third, and most important, is that Israeli and Palestinian leaders will sign a deal when they've overcome, or are cajoled (or bribed or "pressured") into suppressing, psychological barriers--at which point they'll exert sovereign power to implement what they've signed.

The inference for action is new invitations to summits and secret negotiations, more hand-holding--perhaps some public hand-wringing--with the U.S. providing diplomatic structure and a sense of urgency: in effect, a new [Road Map](#) like the one Mitchell gave us in 2002, albeit with a reinvigorated navigator. What we will not get is a precise destination or an American at the wheel, that is, a peace deal stipulated by the U.S. government itself and the patient, firm diplomacy over several years to bring outliers into line. Which means--no matter who wins the Israeli election, but especially with Benjamin Netanyahu's rightist bloc poised to reassume power--that we will not get peace at all, perhaps never.

A reasonable deal is already known. It was all but negotiated in Taba in January 2001, between the outgoing Labor government of Ehud Barak and the Fatah leadership now in power in the Palestinian Authority; when the parties had got stuck the month before, the American president, husband of the Secretary of State-designate, offered bridging "parameters," which along with the Taba agreements were given detailed articulation in the Geneva Initiative of 2003. The Clinton parameters were implicitly underpinned by the 2002 declaration of the Arab League.

Their terms are well known. They were spelled out recently by [Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski](#): the 1967 borders, with minor, reciprocal and agreed-upon modifications; compensation and repatriation to Palestine as the way Palestinian refugees exercise their right of return; Jerusalem as home to two capitals, with creative ascriptions of sovereignty for the old city and Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary; and a non-militarized Palestinian state, reinforced by a significant "international presence."

The Clinton parameters were set aside by Ariel Sharon because he (and his rightist bloc) did not want to entertain its compromises; his disengagement from Gaza was meant to allow for consolidating Israel's hold on the West Bank settlements and Jerusalem. In effect, Ehud Olmert [implicitly endorsed](#) the parameters all over again before the Gaza operation, though his decision to attack so violently may say something about his sincerity; Netanyahu says he will end any negotiation over them were he elected, for the same reason Sharon did.

America is itself an interested party. Israel and Palestine are really just two-city states, together about the scale of greater Los Angeles, fitting together like jig-saw puzzle pieces. The Middle East, which their conflict roils, has the span of a continent, with the world's largest proven reserves of oil and dollars, teens and violence. The U.S. can have no leverage in its diplomacy with Iran, therefore, no orderly exit from Iraq, without a working partnership with the surrounding, "moderate" regimes of the Arab League--regimes that could provide peace-keepers, investment capital, understanding journalists, and diplomatic cover.

Which brings us to the "Arab street." Anyone who's visited Fez or Tripoli or Amman knows that a burgeoning Arab middle class hungers for Westernization; they look at Dubai and Tehran and choose Dubai. But they are surrounded by restless, mainly under-educated people, governed by mosques and fathers where state security services leave off. World economic stresses will only make them more volatile. Obama's is the face of a more progressive globalization but, as in Tehran in 1979, a throng can become a riot, a riot a movement. How many Al-Jazeera-projected images of new violence in Gaza, or South Lebanon, before crowds inflamed by western "materialism" try to storm the Israeli or American embassy in Cairo? How many times can Mubarak's police fend them off before somebody gets killed--and retaliatory violence spreads to take down Mubarak's regime itself?

The deal is not getting done, not because of psychological barriers, but because each side's moderates are in an impossible political trap, which only great power intervention can spring them from. Everyone knows by now that Palestine is really two entities, a West Bank majority, nominally led by the Palestinian Authority--really by a secular business and professional class in Ramallah--and, an Islamist minority, centered in Gaza, and run by an arguably pragmatic but inarguably totalitarian Hamas. What we have yet to learn, however, is that Israel is, in effect, two entities, also.

There is a slim secular majority, a Hebrew-speaking republic, anchored by Tel-Aviv, hugging the coastal plain, and profiting increasingly from the global grid. This Israel is McCainish about security and the IDF, but skeptical of annexation of occupied territory. It is

comparatively highly educated and instinctively cosmopolitan, vaguely committed to democratic norms--or at least to a "Jewish majority"--and therefore to a peace process. It can imagine a Palestinian state alongside.

But this same Israel is not at all sure its own one-fifth Arab minority will ever accept a "Jewish state" or is even sure what this means. And since 1967, its anachronistic "Zionist" settlement policies, and laws privileging orthodoxy, have engendered a huge Judean state-within-a-state, centered on Jerusalem, largely theocratic, and deeply implicated in West Bank settlements. Judea is less educated than the rest of Israel and instinctively more tribalist. "Judeans" are largely wards of the state: most disdain peace (that is, a return of a couple of million of Palestinian refugees to Greater Jerusalem) as the end of their way of life. Diaspora Jewish big-shots are mostly smitten by Judeans, whose religious and survivalist rhetoric they understand much better Tel-Aviv's eclectic Hebrew culture.

And here is the trap. West Bank elites may want to see Hamas undermined, but they will not fight Hamas supporters for the sake of Israel. Secular Israelis, meanwhile, will not fight Judeans for the sake of Palestine. All fear the loss of social solidarity. Moderate leaders on both sides are particularly stuck: on both sides, the years of vendetta make cynicism about peace sound smart and brave; deterrence by intimidation--that is, the killing of each other's civilians to discredit the other side's policies--seems the only way to get "quiet." But when you consider that one quarter of Israeli first graders are Arabs, and another quarter are ultraOrthodox of various kinds, it is easier to anticipate a future of ethnic cleansing than quiet.

II

Palestine is not Hamas and Israel is not its settlers, though the trends are not encouraging. Poll after poll shows that a majority of Palestinians [still want](#) a two-state solution with Israel, while surrendering to the logic of violent struggle. Palestinian elites still look forward to cooperation with Israelis on advanced businesses, higher education, construction, and tourism; they may even have some affection for Israelis; they know that their economic dignity and secular life depend on staving off Hamas. And a majority of Israelis still want peace with Palestine, skeptical as they may be of Palestinian political institutions. Israeli elites are raging against Hamas, but are still stirred by globalization and know that West Bank business infrastructure cannot develop with 500 checkpoints. They know their own economic growth and cultural vitality depend on peace; their children, many of whom are leaving the country, hate guarding and paying for settlements.



Yet both sides' leaders, no matter who they are, cannot break out of a now [impossible bind](#). They cannot imagine prompting a near-term fight with their own rejectionists, which means wide-scale civil disobedience, even civil war, for a long-term negotiation that would be hostage to the first atrocity. Peace advocates are exhausted, increasingly cynical, overwhelmed by military professionals and insurgent militias depicting their own actions as preempting the other side in a fight-to-the-finish. Hamas and Israeli rightists do not oppose a peace deal the way Republicans oppose Keynes. They have killed their own

leaders to get their way. And this--not just a stalled "peacemaking process"--is where America comes in.

THERE IS ONLY way out of this trap: the Obama administration must make it clear—crystal—that the deal embodied in the Clinton parameters is American policy and a vital American national interest. To oppose it is to oppose America. Negotiation is over the details of implementing it, like the [Geneva Initiative](#) group, but not over its main principles. For the record, the Israeli government under Ehud Barak accepted these principles in December 2000, while Yasir Arafat dragged his feet, accepted them with reservations, but then authorized the PA negotiating team to follow up at Taba (out of which the Geneva negotiations sprouted). Later in 2002, as the violence spread, Arafat [accepted the Taba plan](#).

So in adopting the Clinton parameters, the Obama administration would not exactly be pushing on an open door, but it would be embracing the deal that any Israeli and Palestinian leader sincere about peace has already embraced. Adoption would certainly expose leaders who are not sincere about peace--people who use the other side's threat as a cover for ultra-nationalist ends. One such leader may soon be the Israeli prime minister.

The PA's current leaders, many of whom have participated in creating the deal, are not likely to act in ways that will undermine it. They are its most obvious beneficiaries, and will no doubt use it to gain international legitimacy for a stronger security force, and new infrastructural investment, leading to a Palestinian state. And adoption would reinvigorate the Israeli peace camp; it would immediately reimpose an invisible border. In any case, Israeli leaders must see that resisting this deal means foiling American interests, those of the European Union, and moderate Arab regimes, too; that this is the *world's* deal, based on conventional notions of civil rights and utilitarian principles; that Israel risks growing isolation, political and economic, if it fails to adapt to it. New settlements beyond this border, in the West Bank or Jerusalem, will be met with sanctions.

Israel's leaders, in other words, must start their planning for a *permanent* border, and new administrative arrangements for Jerusalem. As CBS's Bob Simon put it, they must be [put into a "panic"](#) that American support is now conditional on specific behavior. The Road Map, which was Senator Mitchell's brainchild, speaks of building confidence—Israel by stopping settlements, Palestinians by containing terror—before moving to a deal. If this sequence ever made sense, it now gets things exactly backwards. Both sides need the deal to be etched in their imaginations and reinforced by all manner of international actions. Only then does it make sense to speak of building confidence.

THERE IS A serious change in approach here, as there has been with the economy, but it is not hard to imagine how to proceed. Senator Mitchell is coming here next week, according to reliable reports. Secretary Clinton might come immediately after his initial meetings to address both the Israeli Knesset and what's left of the Palestinian parliament to announce that the Clinton parameters are American policy; that she challenges all sides to embrace them. Obama, for his part, should then stress how failure to accept the parameters will be viewed as inimical to American plans for the region.

In parallel, Clinton and the new National Security Advisor, General James Jones, should line-up [support from the EU](#) and the UN Security Council, which will almost certainly rally to them. But their vision should not end there. They should speak positively about President Sarkozy's idea of a Mediterranean Union, with Israel and Turkey acting as anchors. Clinton should offer to help organize a start to a regional water carrier to bring Turkish water to Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Israel. There should be talk of an common market between Israel, Palestine and Jordan. Jones should speak about a bilateral defense pact with Israel and an American naval base in Haifa. The U.S. must get away from the idea that peace means "We give them land, and then maybe they'll leave us alone."

Rather, the deal should appear a part of an emerging global consensus--like cooperation on emergency financial reform, or police action against terror. The talk should be of new federal relations and new economic unions: a patently Jewish state that is also a state of global citizens; a Palestinian state linked to Jordan and Israel that is patently a state of laws and civil rights. People who oppose the consensus must be made to feel like international pariahs, not just opponents of some (spineless) domestic "peace camp."

YET—AND THIS is crucial—President Obama should stress that implementation need not be rushed. As long as all know where we are going, we can get there with deliberate caution, in a gradual but time-certain way that permits affected parties—Israeli settlers, returning Palestinian refugees, Israeli defense specialists nervous about letting go of the tiger's tail—to take steps toward a new reality in ways that minimize the furies of disappointment and grief. A little compassion, and a lot of hopeful oratory, can go along way here. The deal will overturn many lives; it will take some time for people to see its virtues. Obama's ability to speak about generational transformation is a unique asset here.

Israeli settlers must be given time, perhaps five years, to find new homes within the Israeli state. The Israeli state apparatus should have time to repatriate and compensate Israelis who return; to plan, with the help of international forces, to cut settlements off according to a time-table from the Israeli power grid and water network.

The PA, for its part, should be given time to develop an effective domestic security force, like the one in Ramallah and Jenin, to establish its authority throughout the West Bank. Before refugees begin returning, the PA must be given time to engender the businesses and construction projects that will employ them. The state must develop an "absorptive capacity," as the British once said about the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine. Only then will the PA be able to restart dialogue with Hamas from a position of strength. Meantime, the border between Gaza and Egypt should be opened.

Most important--and even before Israel terminates its occupation--the U.S. should lead the creation of a 10,000-person NATO force in and around Gaza and the West Bank, to monitor events and buttress anticipated areas of demilitarization. The force should give greater confidence to foreign investors, working alongside--not in place of--the emerging PA police. All members of the Arab league should make clear that recognition of Israel and full peace goes along with the deal; they should offer as down payment open academic and business exchanges with Israel. In this context, a peace with Syria should be concluded, with the demilitarized Golan turned into a demilitarized nature preserve.

The point is, if we have learned anything from this past year it is that things that "cannot go on" eventually can't. The current carnage in Gaza is nothing if not a wake-up call: peace is not impossible, but Jerusalem could become a kind of Sarajevo in a matter of weeks, with Israeli Arabs joining in the fray. President Obama has the privilege of coming into power during a Middle Eastern crisis, which like all the other crises create opportunity. He can bring a new era to this region, but as with his plans for economic recovery, climate change, and the rest, the greatest danger is in thinking small.