On Board

by Robert Satloff **(/experts/robert-satloff)**

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Articles & Testimony

The Arab-Israeli peace process is, to use the metaphor of choice, "back on track." That, at least, is the stylized version of the message Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak brought with him to Washington in mid-July. The reality, of course, is more complicated. And, for the Clinton administration, Barak's real message was calming, unnerving, and startling -- all at the same time.

For a president with an eye toward history, the welcome part was Barak's decision to make the peace process his top priority; he promised, with characteristic modesty, to "end the Arab-Israeli conflict." On the tactical front, the administration was also pleased that Barak was cagey enough to affirm the dual-track approach of pursuing peace with both Syria and the Palestinians simultaneously, all the while signaling his clear interest in a speedy (i.e., six-to-eight-month) real estate transaction with Damascus in contrast to the messy, time-consuming divorce settlement with the Palestinians. And, despite some grumbling about Barak's all-too-public pre-arrival criticism of the CIA's role in supervising the minutiae of Palestinian compliance with the Wye memorandum, the administration actually endorses his preference to turn back the clock to the pre-Netanyahu formula, in which Washington was the indispensable interlocutor with Syria but only a supporting actor in the Palestinian drama. Indeed, Clinton has done little to dispel rumors that he would serve as his own "special envoy" to clinch a peace deal with Hafez al-Assad. Hence, the White House's disappointment that the Syrian leader passed up this week's funeral for Morocco's King Hassan II, denying Clinton a chance to orchestrate a second "historic handshake" between an Israeli prime minister and a legendary Arab adversary.

But, if Barak's infectious enthusiasm for the peace process buoyed the hopes of his American hosts by conjuring up images of one, two, or perhaps even three more White House signing ceremonies before the November 2000 election, the details of his negotiating posture were, to some policymakers, unsettling.

Barak reminded Washington that he does not like the way the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has developed. Ever since Barak, then the Israel Defense Forces' chief of staff, was denied any role in the secret negotiation of the original Oslo accords in 1993, he has criticized a process by which Israel withdraws from incremental slices of West Bank territory without a clear idea of the final line of withdrawal, the nature of the Palestinian entity that will emerge on the ceded land, or the ultimate relationship between that entity and Israel. While recognizing that a tentative, incremental approach may have been necessary in 1993 as the first step toward peace, Barak thought it folly to

maintain that strategy in subsequent agreements. As a result, when the Oslo II accord was brought before the Israeli Cabinet in September 1995, then-Interior Minister Barak abstained.

Last year's Wye memorandum raised incrementalism to new heights. One of its principal features was to divide the first two of the three Israeli-promised "further redeployments" envisioned in Oslo II into three slivers of withdrawal, each of which would be linked to a series of Palestinian actions designed to fulfill obligations outstanding from previous agreements. Not surprisingly, Barak thoroughly disliked Wye and wanted a way out. His proposed solution was to fulfill the first two redeployments and then fold discussions about later withdrawals into a comprehensive negotiation on a "declaration of principles" for a final resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Clinton listened politely, as he had when Netanyahu made a similar pitch about junking incrementalism in February 1997. At that time, Clinton didn't sign on because he didn't trust Netanyahu's bona fides. This time, Clinton didn't doubt Barak's sincerity, but he was hamstrung by his commitment to the language of the Wye accords and to his growing relationship with Arafat. Wye, after all, was a deal Israel made with Arafat (and, one shouldn't forget, Clinton's own personal achievement). Any change in Wye, Clinton reportedly reminded Barak, would have to meet with Arafat's approval.

Also unsettling was the realization that, while Barak may be more serious than Netanyahu about reaching peace with the Arabs, he's not much more willing to compromise on specific items on the negotiating agenda than his predecessor was. His four "no"s on the Palestinian track -- no return to the 1967 borders, no uprooting of Israeli settlements, no division of "united Jerusalem," and no modern Arab army west of the Jordan river -- are consensus principles inside Israel that Ariel Sharon's Likud would support. Indeed, on perhaps the most emotive issue for Palestinians -- Jewish settlement in the West Bank -- Barak has so far shown himself far more sympathetic to settlers than was his mentor, the slain Yitzhak Rabin. Just days after Clinton slammed Israel's "destructive settlement policy," Barak, standing in the Rose Garden, reminded his host that almost all settlers came to the territories "through the approval of the Israeli government" and that he himself believes in maintaining a "strong bloc of settlements that will include most of the settlers in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip."

And, vis-a-vis Syria, Barak may prove amenable to much of Assad's territorial requirement -- perhaps accepting a withdrawal to the 1923 international boundary, modified in spots to give Assad the appearance of additional concessions but he has hinted that he will be more demanding than expected on Israel's security requirements. One important sign was Barak's announcement that U.S. troops would not be needed to police the Golan Heights, the way 1,000 GIs currently patrol the Sinai desert more than 20 years after Egypt-Israel peace. By taking issue of the U.S. troops off the table, Barak not only defused potential critics of a Syria-Israel peace, he also signaled that Israel would demand more extensive Syrian demilitarization, deeper Syrian force limitation zones, and perhaps even a continued Israeli presence in the Golan to monitor early-warning installations as compensation for returning the strategic plateau to Syrian sovereignty.

Perhaps most startling about Barak's visit was the sheer enormousness of his vision. Barak thinks big. In addition to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Barak's Washington agenda addressed questions as diverse as how to redesign the Israel Defense Forces (build a smaller, smarter army), how to solve the Palestinian refugee problem (resettle most in host countries), and how to fix the Middle East water shortage (invest heavily in desalination plants). Privately, Israeli officials even explored whether U.S. generosity would extend, in the context of peace, to direct financial assistance to Syria. With ingenuity, will, and tens of billions of U.S. dollars -- now miraculously available thanks to budget surpluses -- no problem seemed impervious to solution.

Determined to consign the Netanyahu interlude to history, the Clinton administration provided Barak with the warmest reception any newly elected Israeli premier has ever received in Washington. On a personal level, Barak was feted in a movable feast that included a gala soiree in the White House, an intimate dinner at Camp David, a

buffet lunch at Al Gore's Observatory Hill residence, and breakfast at Madeleine Albright's Georgetown townhouse. Politically, the administration came up with money for Israel's Arrow anti-missile missile program, just three months after informing Netanyahu's defense minister that the cupboard looked bare and, just three months after telling Arafat that Washington supported a twelve-month "target" for a "final status agreement" on the future of the West Bank and Gaza, promised Barak that America would never set negotiating deadlines.

Accompanied by less fanfare, but perhaps of greater significance, was a decision by the administration to broaden the "strategic partnership" between the United States and Israel. In a joint communique remarkable for its focus on what Washington can do to assist Israel -- a throwback to the days before the emergence of the concept of "strategic cooperation," when the two sides tended to emphasize joint efforts to meet common threats -- Clinton committed the United States to "strengthen[ing] Israel's ability to deter and defend itself, by itself, against any threat or a possible combination of threats" and to "bolster[ing] Israel's indigenous defense and deterrent capabilities." These words, which underscore the role of Israel's homemade, unspoken-of deterrent and lack the qualifiers of past declarations, almost certainly will catch the attention of strategists from Cairo to Tehran.

In compensating Barak in strategic coin for his pursuit of peace diplomacy, Clinton has, in fact, reverted to the formula that worked so well with Rabin. On some aspects of the peace process, however, turning back the clock will not be so easy. And, on other aspects, reliving the 1993-96 experience would only invite further disappointment.

Barak may want the United States to stop playing "policeman, judge, and arbitrator" of Israeli-Palestinian relations, returning to the "facilitator" role Washington fulfilled under Rabin, but, without Arafat's approval, neither Barak nor Clinton can escape the fact that America is bound under the Wye accords to play all three roles. So far, Arafat has shown no inclination to release Washington from its contractual obligations. In a twist of historic irony, Arafat's Cabinet declared last week that "the American role [is] vital to ensure the success of complex negotiations." That is because Arafat knows that the closer the parties move toward addressing the "final status" agenda -- Jerusalem, settlements, borders, refugees, and the question of Palestinian statehood -- the more likely it is that Washington's traditional legalistic positions, which are closer to the Palestinians' on each of these issues, will clash with the administration's political affinity for Barak.

Conversely, other aspects of the U.S. role during the Rabin era of peacemaking are best left in the past. It was during those halcyon days that the United States accepted Israel's argument that it was wise to turn a blind eye to the growing authoritarianism of the Palestinian Authority, preferring not to press Arafat too far too fast lest the radical Hamas gain strength, and that it was best not to look too closely at Palestinian compliance with Oslo requirements lest Arafat's status as a legitimate peace partner come under scrutiny. In retrospect, Washington always had greater freedom than Israel to demand both democracy and security from the PA, and, as we now know, Arafat has always been strong enough relative to all competitors that he could have delivered more on both counts.

In trying to advance both peace between Syria and Israel and U.S. regional interests, a replay of the 1993-96 experience does not seem to be a hopeful prospect either. That was the period when Clinton, ever mindful of Assad's sensibilities, stood silently on the dais in Damascus as the Syrian leader asked a roomful of reporters whether anyone could cite a single act of Syrian-inspired terrorism and when the White House touted a "mechanism" for addressing Syrian support of terrorism that convened once and was never heard of again. While U.S. officials, especially then-Secretary of State Warren Christopher, bravely bared themselves to ridicule in order to fulfill the diplomat's task of shuttling between Rabin and Assad, a U.S. miscommunication of Rabin's hypothetical proposal regarding withdrawal from the Golan lies at the heart of the Syria-Israel dispute over where their talks actually left off. And never, during this period or since, has the United States articulated a vision of how Syria-Israel peace -- which some, in both Israel and Washington, expect to be liberally greased with U.S. economic assistance -- will, as a matter of course, advance related U.S. interests, such as the severing of the Syria-Iran strategic relationship, the

withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon, or the opening of Syria's closed society.

Today, Clinton and Barak stand ready to board a train that will reach its destination only if the two are in sync in terms of both tactics and strategy. Barak's ten hours of talks with Clinton narrowed gaps, but differences persist. Yet the two leaders have strong motives to reach agreements far in advance of Barak's 15-month target date -- Clinton in order to earn the mantle of peacemaker before plunging into his wife's and his vice president's election campaigns; Barak to fulfill his own campaign promise to quit Lebanon by next summer and to exploit his standing in Washington before his broad-based, secular-to-religious coalition begins to fray at home.

In the end, the principal obstacle to peace treaties with Syria and the Palestinians is likely to be the reluctance of aging leaders in Gaza and Damascus to break with decades of precedents and make the compromises necessary for peace to happen. Together, Clinton and Barak are sure to find a way to fire up the engine of the Arab-Israeli peace train, but it's still up to Assad and Arafat to hop aboard.

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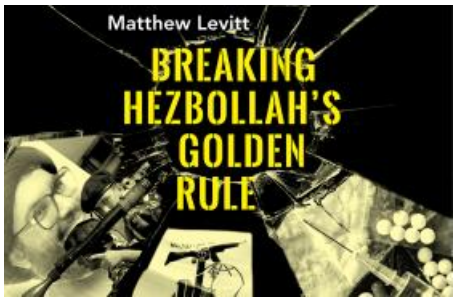

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