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A LITTLE PUSH FROM WASHINGTON

WHY should we in Israel, in addition to our other troubles, be subjected to an almost daily dose of double-talk? We have nearly got used to it from Mr Rabin with his "I did say it, but I didn't mean it the way it sounds," "leave the Golan" does not mean "get off the Golan," "peace in six months," "in nine months," "not in my lifetime." He has almost brought to life the famous reply of a cabinet minister to a questioner, "I've said 'maybe,' and that's final." Do we need this kind of babble from Washington as well? We were assured that Mr. Clinton, who was not acquainted closely with the Israeli-Arab dispute, would not in any case, because of his urgent domestic problems, be able to deal with the situation here. Consequently, he would have to delegate some of his duties, including his need to study and think, to Secretary of State Christopher. Mr Christopher, however, is also known to have had little or no experience with the problem.

Thus the burden of thinking and recommending devolves on the State Department. There, thinking is not necessary. They have it all in their files, ready cooked.

In short, just as in the past, briefings will come from the State Department officials, with minimum or no substantive input from the president or even the secretary. As far as we can judge, the only positive instruction from the president has been "continuity." The first item on the new administration's agenda, inherited from president Bush, is peace with Syria. US relations with Syria are a continuing mystery.

When Carter was elected president, one of the first foreign statesmen he met (in Europe) was Assad, and he gave Carter a tutorial lecture on Israel and the Arabs. He told Carter that a complete withdrawal by Israel from "all the territories" could be only the first stage. To follow had to be the implementation of the Right of Return (of the "refugees" to Jaffa, Haifa, et al.).

Carter then described Assad publicly as a "moderate." Assad has since demonstrated eloquently how "moderate" he is. There was, for example, the massacre of 10,000 of his own citizens in Hama, and his notable promotion of terrorism in Lebanon, Israel and at large - so that his American friends have not been able to remove Syria from the official list of states responsible for international terror. This is the man to whom Bush promised to deliver the Golan.

To be fair, he is the man with whom the Shamir government opened negotiations as part of the "peace process," negotiations which the Rabin government continued with much fanfare, and with many assertions that Assad had changed his policy, a change which Mr Peres described as "sensational." THERE has of course been no change. It is important for our national sanity to repeat and re-emphasize that none of the Arab states has changed its purpose one iota, since the first invasion of the infant State of Israel in 1948. A good friend of the Arabs, Peter Young, put it very succinctly: "If the Arabs could agree on nothing else, they could at least agree that Israel as a state must be extinguished.

Israel delenda est." For Syria indeed the elimination of Israel is an essential prelude to the fulfillment of a specific ideal: the creation of "Greater Syria" - which will encompass Jordan and Lebanon as well. The first step toward that consummation is the regaining of the Golan, and everybody, including Mr Rabin, knows that for that goal Assad can count

on the support of the US. Yet, with a straight face, Washington appears on the stage as an honest broker.

In announcing that it intended to get involved in the "peace process" the Clinton administration emphasized that it would not - heaven forbid - intervene in the substantive negotiations; it would help only to keep them on track. Hence, after his meeting with Mr Rabin, Clinton expressed his satisfaction at Rabin's readiness to "take risks for peace," and asked him to be "flexible with the Palestinians"; and an aide told The Jerusalem Post that Clinton would "only" present proposals for compromises after consulting Rabin. (In the lexicon of the Israeli-Arab dispute "compromise" is designed as a balanced two-way process: Israel gives, Arabs take.)

Nobody has thought to ask why, if peace requires the taking of risks, it is Israel that has to take them. It does of course happen in the history of disputes that a nation that has been defeated, and certainly a defeated aggressor nation, is made to pay a price for peace (in territory, in reparations, etc.). That makes sense; and it makes sense, most obviously, on the Golan Heights.

It makes sense equally obviously in Israeli control of Judea, Samaria and Gaza, quite apart from the weighty historical considerations. Now, however, facing the political realities created by the Rabin-Aloni government which is being offered a friendly push by Washington, we may expect an imitation of the model of the peace process initiated by prime minister Begin in 1977. Do you remember that his original plan proposed conceding to Egypt only about 97 percent of Sadat's demands? Israel was to retain the use of one airfield, and the Israeli residents would not be expelled.

Then, however, began the salami process, which ended with Sadat's receiving the remaining 3 percent (including the expulsion of all the Israelis living in Sinai), and also a clause in the treaty legitimizing Egypt's going to war with Israel if called on to do so under separate agreements it had with other Arab states. Then followed the non-fulfillment of most of the subsidiary agreements - trade, tourism, prohibition of hostile propaganda, etc. - which have remained dead letters to this day.

Now Syria has made plain to the US that it will expect an immediate declaration by Israel recognizing Syrian sovereignty over the Golan, but as for territory, it is prepared to accept it piecemeal, provided the transfer, including the removal of all Jews, is completed in five years. In that meantime the "Palestinian problem" must be solved. Then, Syria will be able to consider a peace treaty with Israel.

Mr Rabin has declared that he intends "coordinating" policy with Washington. Negotiations would therefore follow the Camp David pattern. First Israel accepts all or part of an American proposal (for an Israeli concession).

This "coordinated" proposal is put to the Arabs. They reject it, and a period of "freeze" follows, during which Washington urges flexibility on Israel, while well-briefed American media launch a campaign denouncing Israeli intransigence. If the Camp David pattern is followed in its entirety, one must add that throughout the process, Americans and Arabs would plan together in secret the tactics of this salami process.

That is how it was done at Camp David. Of course, this plan for weakening Israel and, as the Arabs hope, finally dismantling it, need not be consummated. Thwarting it is surely the main task facing the sane majority of the people in Israel and of Israel's many friends in the US.