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26.9.09

The Drama and the Farce

NO POINT denying it: in the first round of the match between Barack Obama and Binyamin Netanyahu, Obama was beaten.

Obama had demanded a freeze of all settlement activity, including East Jerusalem, as a condition for convening a tripartite summit meeting, in the wake of which accelerated peace negotiations were to start, leading to peace between two states – Israel and Palestine.

In the words of the ancient proverb, a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step. Netanyahu has tripped Obama on his first step. The President of the United States has stumbled.

THE THREEFOLD summit did indeed take place. But instead of a shining achievement for the new American administration, we witnessed a humbling demonstration of weakness. After Obama was compelled to give up his demand for a settlement freeze, the meeting no longer had any content.

True, Mahmoud Abbas did come, after all. He was dragged there against his will. The poor man was unable to refuse the invitation from Obama, his only support. But he will pay a heavy price for this flight: the Palestinians, and the entire Arab world, have seen his weakness. And Obama, who had started his term with a ringing speech to the Muslim world from Cairo, now looks like a broken reed.

The Israeli peace movement has been dealt another painful blow. It had pinned its hopes on the steadfastness of the American president. Obama's victory and the settlement freeze were to show the Israeli public that the refusal policy of Netanyahu was leading to disaster.

But Netanyahu has won, and in a big way. Not only did he survive, not only has he shown that he is no "sucker" (a word he uses all the time), he has proven to his people – and to the public at large – that there is nothing to fear: Obama is nothing but a paper tiger. The settlements can go on expanding without hindrance. Any negotiations that start, if they start at all, can go on until the coming of the Messiah. Nothing will come out of them.

For Netanyahu, the threat of peace has passed. At least for the time being.

IT IS difficult to understand how Obama allowed himself to get into this embarrassing situation.

Machiavelli taught that one should not challenge a lion unless one is able to kill him. And Netanyahu is not even a lion, just a fox.

Why did Obama insist on the settlement freeze – in itself a very reasonable demand – if he was unable to stand his ground? Or, in other words, if he was unable to impose it on Netanyahu?

Before entering into such a campaign, a statesman must weigh up the array of forces: What power is at my disposal? What forces are confronting me? How determined is the other side? What means am I ready to employ? How far am I prepared to go in using my power?

Obama has a host of able advisors, headed by Rahm Emanuel, whose Israeli origins (and name) were supposed to give him special insights. George Mitchell, a hard-nosed and experienced diplomat, was supposed to provide sober assessments. How did they all fail?

Logic would say that Obama, before entering the fray, should have decided which instruments of pressure to employ. The arsenal is inexhaustible – from a threat by the US not to shield the Israeli government with its veto in the Security Council, to delaying the next shipment of arms. In 1992 James Baker, George Bush Sr's Secretary of State, threatened to withhold American guarantees for Israel's loans abroad. That was enough to drag even Yitzhak Shamir to the Madrid conference.

It seems that Obama was either unable or unwilling to exert such pressures, even secretly, even behind the scenes. This week he allowed the American navy to conduct major joint war-games with the Israeli Air Force.

Some people hoped that Obama would use the Goldstone report to exert pressure on Netanyahu. Just one hint that the US might not use its veto in the Security Council would have sown panic in Jerusalem. Instead, Washington published a statement on the report, dutifully toeing the Israeli propaganda line.

True, it is hard for the US to condemn war crimes that are so similar to those committed by its own soldiers. If Israeli commanders are put on trial in The Hague, American generals may be next in line. Until now, only the losers in wars were indicted. What will the world come to if those who remain in office are also accused?

THE INESCAPABLE conclusion is that Obama's defeat is the outcome of a faulty assessment of the situation. His advisors, who are considered seasoned politicians, were wrong about the forces involved.

That has happened already in the crucial health insurance debate. The opposition is far stronger than anticipated by Obama's people. In order to get out of this mess somehow, Obama needs the support of every senator and congressman he can lay his hands on. That automatically strengthens the position of the pro-Israel lobby, which already has immense influence in Congress.

The last thing that Obama needs at this moment is a declaration of war by AIPAC and Co. Netanyahu, an expert on domestic American politics, scented Obama's weakness and exploited it.

Obama could do nothing but gnash his teeth and fold up.

That debacle is especially painful at this precise point in time. The impression is rapidly gaining ground that he is indeed an inspiring speaker with an uplifting message, but a weak politician, unable to turn his vision into reality. If this view of him firms up, it may cast a shadow over his whole term.

BUT IS Netanyahu's policy wise from the Israeli point of view?

This may well turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory.

Obama will not disappear. He has three and a half years in office before him, and thereafter perhaps four more. That's a lot of time to plan revenge for someone hurt and humiliated at a delicate moment, at the beginning of his term of office.

One cannot know, of course, what is happening in the depths of Obama's heart and in the back of his mind. He is an introvert who keeps his cards close to his chest. His many years as a young black man in the United States have probably taught him to keep his feelings to himself.

He may draw the conclusion, in the footsteps of all his predecessors since Dwight Eisenhower (except Father Bush during Baker's short stint as hatchet man): Don't Mess With Israel. With the help of its partners and servants in the US, it can cause grievous harm to any President.

But he may also draw the opposite conclusion: Wait for the right opportunity, when your standing in the domestic arena is solid, and pay Netanyahu back with interest. If that happens, Netanyahu's air of victory may turn out to be premature.

IF I were asked for advice (not to worry, it won't happen), I would tell him:

The forging of Israeli-Palestinian peace would mean a historic turnabout, a reversal of a 120 year old trend. That is not an easy operation, not to be undertaken lightly. It is not a matter for diplomats and secretaries. It demands a determined leader with a stout heart and a steady hand. If one is not ready for it, one should not even start.

An American President who wants to undertake such a role must formulate a clear and detailed peace plan, with a strict timetable, and be prepared to invest all his resources and all his political capital in its realization. Among other things, he must be ready to confront, face to face, the powerful pro-Israel lobby.

This will not succeed unless public opinion in Israel, Palestine, the Arab world, the United States and the whole world is thoroughly prepared well in advance. It will not succeed without an effective Israeli peace movement, without strong support from US public opinion, especially Jewish-American opinion, without a strong Palestinian leadership and without Arab unity.

At the appropriate moment, the President of the United States must come to Jerusalem and address the Israeli public from the Knesset rostrum, like Anwar Sadat and President Jimmy Carter before him, as well as the Palestinian parliament, like President Bill Clinton.

I don't know if Obama is the man. Some in the peace camp have already given up on him, which effectively means that they have despaired of peace as such. I am not ready for this. One battle rarely decides a war, and one mistake does not foretell the future. A lost battle can steel the loser, a mistake can teach a valuable lesson.

IN ONE of his essays, Karl Marx said that when history repeats itself: The first time it is as tragedy, the second time it is as farce.

The 2000 threefold summit meeting at Camp David was high drama. Many hopes were pinned on it, success seemed to be within reach, but in the end it collapsed, with the participants blaming each other.

The 2009 Waldorf-Astoria summit was the farce.