

CRISIS

Some of our readers have asked for my take on the present crisis in relations between the United States and Israel, and/or Obama and Bibi. I don't fancy myself a great political analyst, but still—with apologies for over-simplification—I offer the following:

1. The Americans

American foreign policy has been remarkably consistent over the years, and the President doesn't usually have much influence in changing it. Nixon to China is one example of the possibility of change, but is an exception. Relations with Cuba, for example, and with China about Taiwan/One-China/Two-Chinas have not moved in the past half century. Whether they should have or should not have is not the point.

Same with Israel. Within a few months after the 6-Day War of 1967 the Americans, together with the Europeans and the United Nations¹, decided that Israeli territorial gains resulting from the war were not to be considered legitimate. Period. Fair? Unfair? Interesting question, but irrelevant. The fact is that the United States, and Europe, have never accepted the Israeli annexation of the Old City of Jerusalem. (Which is weird to us!) Nor of the older (early 70s) neighborhoods of Ramat Eshkol, French Hill, Gilo, Ramot, etc. And for sure not of the newer neighborhoods of Har Homa or Ramat Shlomo. That's the policy. And I—although I think it stupid, immoral, historically unsustainable and even tinged with anti-Semitism—have no criticism of the US administration. The United States is a sovereign nation, of course, and is absolutely entitled to maintain a sovereign foreign polity, whether other nations (like us) like it or not.

The difference, then, between US Presidents as far as the Israelis are concerned is not in matters of policy. That hasn't ever changed. Rather, some Presidents (like Bush II) simply did not enforce US policy, or even try, while others (like Carter & Clinton) did. And Obama is trying to. No complaints; that's what the Americans elected him to do and pay him to do.

¹ "The Security Council... emphasizing the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war...." (Resolution 242, adopted 22 November 1967). Really? Or did they just invent a new moral law in honor of the Jews? Whatever, that was news to anyone who knows any history at all; war was usually the only way anyone ever gained territory!

2. The Israelis

The present Israeli government is politically right wing and religious. That hasn't always been the case, but the collapse of the Left wing in recent elections shows that Netanyahu pretty faithfully reflects the mood of the Israeli electorate. Fair enough; Israel is a sovereign country, of course, and the government is entitled to make policy as it sees best.

This government believes that the Territories are not parts of a foreign country (even though they were occupied by Jordan after 1948) but rather integral parts of the LAND OF ISRAEL (in caps), parts of the Land historically belonging to Israel as promised by Divine covenant. They are ours and we have taken them back from foreign occupation. The fact that the population of these areas is overwhelmingly Arab is important—indeed a problem—and limits one's freedom of action, but is ultimately not relevant. Israel therefore claims its own legitimacy (which the Arabs adamantly deny) and also the legitimacy of its presence in the Territories (which most of the rest of the world isn't buying.)

So far the issue is fairly straight-forward. The difference of opinion on the issue of legitimacy cannot be compromised, and the sides simply need to agree to disagree without violence.²

The trouble with irreconcilable alternatives comes when one side stops fudging-winking-nodding-evading (e.g. don't ask, don't tell) and comes right out and says what it thinks. That's what Bibi and Avigdor Lieberman, his Foreign Minister, are doing. Their position is absolutely right (IMHO), and I agree with (almost) every word of it. But diplomacy doesn't work that way. Diplomacy is evasive by nature. It glides over and smoothes things out. So when you have a trumpet-blowing Israel government and a hard-ass American President used to playing Chicago political hardball, there is bound to be an open clash. Which there is now.

3. The Crisis (the American side)

Things have got sticky because President Obama has decided to make overtures to the Arab & Muslim world. Which in itself is laudable (not to say absolutely legitimate) even if it's based on naïveté. He just doesn't get it: there's no way the West and the Arabs are going to get together. At least not now, when Islam is going through one of its most reactionary, fundamentalist periods. But he will learn sooner or later, and be wiser for it.

There is no way the Americans are able to persuade the Arabs to do anything at all. They have never succeeded in the past and there's no

² As has been done in America, for example, on the issue of abortion.

reason to think they will succeed now; now when crazy Shi'ite Iran is re-arming and they can't stop it, and crazy Sunni Wahabi Saudia Arabia is getting more and more repressive. The Americans have no tools with which to address these tendencies.

Except Israel. The only thing the Administration can do is to pressure Israel to make concessions in the delusional belief that this will affect the root question of legitimacy. And that's what is happening.

4. The Crisis (the Israeli side)

Prime Minister Netanyahu is an intelligent man who knows all of the above perfectly well. He himself might have chosen to react in different ways but he is crippled by an Israeli political system that make it impossible to run this country consistently or intelligently.

For those of you in need of reminding, we have a proportional representation system.

- The whole state is one electoral district,
- Any group with enough signatures can set itself up as a party.
- One votes for the party list rather than for people—who in any case represent the party, not the electorate.

Such a system results in a parliament (of 120 seats) with 10-12 parties (out of 30-35 who competed.) And since no government in the history of the state has ever won an absolute majority, every government since 1948 has been a coalition of parties. And when the largest party has say, 40 seats, it still needs to co-opt another 21 to make the majority of 61 which you need to stay in power. Each of these coalition add-ons has its own agenda, of course, and its own price the government needs to pay. And when one or more of the 61 has the power to topple the government, even if it has only 2 or 3 seats, then the obvious result is bad government at best, government by blackmail most of the time, and irresponsibility and chaos at worst.

These are the conditions in which Netanyahu works. It is a giant game of juggling between the pressures of the Americans, the Orthodox, the settlers, the Labor party on his left wing—Barak, his Defense Minister, comes from the Left—the Arabs, the Palestinians and the world at large; all these balls in the air at once. Fortunately, he is very good at this kind of political juggling. He is in fact a genius at it. Bibi is not a likeable person, and not a *mensch* either, but he is a political wizard. Which is why we still have a government at all when the system would have defeated many lesser men (and women), and has.

Bottom line here; we will continue to have unnecessary crises like this until we change the system of government. That's the way you avoid fiascos like the announcement of building in Ramot Shlomo just when Vice President Biden is here because the Interior Ministry—which controls building permits—is in the hands of Shas, an ultra-Orthodox

party committed to settling the entire Land of Israel (smart or not). And Bibi is dependent on them because without Shas he doesn't have a government. So they pulled a fast one and there's nothing Bibi can do about it without firing Shas, which means dissolving his own government.

5. The Real Victim

A. President Obama will not move Bibi or the Israeli government, even though he has real weapons (economic, political and even military) which allow him to do so if he really wants to. But he works in the framework of his own public opinion which will not allow him to go beyond a certain degree of nastiness.

B. The Arabs won't move, they never have. And these days find themselves with even less incentive to negotiate now that the American President, in his ignorance, has made a dreadful blunder by introducing a new concept into the negotiation, one that was NEVER raised in the past 43 years since 1967: an absolute freeze on settlements³. The Arabs figure, correctly, that they don't need to negotiate with the Israelis at all. Now they have the Americans negotiating for them. The process is in fact moving backwards; Rabin and Barak used to meet with Arafat face to face but now the Palestinians won't even agree to proximity talks: two sides in different rooms (in different cities: Jerusalem and Ramallah!) with an emissary shuttling between them.

And Bibi is too smart to agree to anything that would really compromise Israel's vital interest. He has more Middle Eastern smarts than the young American President, and more experience, by far.

C. PREDICTION: THE AMERICANS WILL BACK OFF, AND BIBI WILL MAKE ENOUGH SMALL GESTURES TO KEEP THEM HAPPY, AND NOTHING WILL HAPPEN NOW. AT LEAST NOT UNTIL IRAN BLOWS UP. THE STATUS QUO REIGNS UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

D. So who loses? The Jews of America lose. Because 80% of them supported Obama and the best and brightest of them still believe that he is the great hope for the American future. They will not abandon him willingly, if at all. And so the tug of war is inevitable. The American government will keep the pressure—which may get nastier too—on Israel. The Arabs won't budge at all, as usual. And the Israelis will resist American pressure as long as they can.

It's the Jews of America, who support both Obama and Israel, who will find themselves in an increasingly impossible position. The simple logic is that at some stage—if things keep going like this—the Jews of America will be forced into making a terrible choice: Obama or Israel.

Not to worry; it won't happen. But it would not be a pretty sight if it did. It's never pretty when one realizes that his god has failed. ■

³ Which in the American view includes East Jerusalem itself. This is a position that no Israeli government can ever accept, and one imagines that Obama knows that.