

SPIEGEL ONLINE

05/19/2009 05:35 PM

MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Obama's Mission Impossible

By Henryk M. Broder

Obama isn't distancing himself from Israel, nor is he making advances towards Palestine. He wants to force both sides to get off the hamster wheel and take some real steps forward.

The meeting between Barack Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu didn't really need to take place. Most reporters and commentators knew in advance that it would come to a show down. The anchorwoman of the television news in far-off Hamburg acted as if she had been at the meeting. "The public appearances of the two men must have demanded real acting skills," she said, because "Obama is distancing himself from Israel."



AFP

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appears to be listening, and Barack Obama doesn't just appear to mean business.

As so often in the Middle East peace process, when dealing with relations between Israelis and Palestinians and the rest of the world, we let our hopes govern our heads. Unwilling and unable to make a constructive contribution towards a solution and at the same time frustrated that the Americans have taken the initiative, Europeans do what they do best: warn and complain, like the viewers of a soccer game, who -- from the stands -- know they would convert every strike into a goal.

Indeed, what Obama is trying to do looks a lot like a "mission impossible." But so was the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948, the democratization of Germany after 1945 and the election of an African-American US president in 2008.

Granted, solving the Palestinian question, which has been discussed, negotiated and fought over for more than a century, is even more complicated, much like squaring the circle. Because just as the conflict didn't begin with the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, nor will it end with the declaration of a Palestinian state in the occupied territories. After over 40 years' occupation, there can be no return to a status quo ante, because the status quo ante itself is a subject of dispute. For most Israelis, it is Israel within its 1967 borders, while for Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran, it's Palestine prior to the founding of Israel. When they talk about the end of the occupation, they don't mean Hebron, Ramallah, Bethlehem and Nablus, they mean Haifa, Beersheba, Jaffa and Tiberias.

Both Sides Are Sitting Out the Other

Even the statements of the "moderate" PLO are ambivalent, depending who's talking and who they're talking to. The Palestinian ambassador to Beirut, Abbas Zaki, said in a television interview in early May that the two state solution would result in Israel's collapse, the use of weapons wouldn't solve anything, but political negotiation without the use of arms wouldn't work either. "In light of the weakness of the Arab nation and the lack of values, and in light of the American control over the world, the PLO proceeds through phases, without changing its strategy." With Allah's help, Zaki said, "we'll drive them out of all of Palestine." That doesn't sound much like a solution for the Israelis.

Obama may be new on the world stage but he's no amateur. He knows that what's gone on so far have been negotiations about negotiations and that both sides are trying to sit out the other. For 16

years, since the Oslo Accords, the Israelis and Palestinians have been spending a lot of energy going nowhere, like hamsters on a wheel. One side insists on the expansion of settlements, the other demands their right of return -- like travellers who've taken the wrong train and getting ever farther away from their destination, but not wanting to get off because they've been travelling so long. So the Israelis play victors in a dead end and the Palestinians, heroes without any prospect of success. Every once in a while they take part in conferences to discuss "confidence-building measures" which lead to yet more conferences on further "confidence-building measures." With the exception of such incidents as the wars in Lebanon and Gaza, they almost seem to be coming to terms with each other, while the Americans and Europeans cover the costs of room and board from Oslo to Annapolis.

And now Obama wants to know: what are the Israelis and Palestinians really willing to undertake? Enough playing around, let's get down to business. Obama is not distancing himself from Israel, nor is he making advances towards the Palestinians. He just wants to force both parties to get out of the sandbox and take a look at the facts. Because just outside the playground there's someone who doesn't care a wit about the Israelis and the Palestinians and who --through all the staged craziness -- is behaving quite reasonably: Iran.

An Iron Fist in a Velvet Glove

Obama risks nothing by offering to negotiate with Iran. As he said on Monday, he wants to see results by the end of the year. If Iran doesn't budge, Obama will have to change his strategy. If Bush was a cowboy with a soft heart, Obama is an iron fist in a velvet glove. He shouldn't be underestimated, just because he's charming, polite and obliging. Such traits alone have yet to make an American president.

Obama knows that Iran won't attack Israel, because as much as the ayatollahs and mullahs want a "world without Zionism" and wish that Israel would disappear from the map or better yet, from the history books, they still prefer to live in the lap of luxury and -- when needs be -- they send others to paradise. But an nuclear preventative or counter strike by the Israelis would end their comfortable lives for good.

Of course there's always a marginal risk. So far the Israelis have been pretty relaxed about Iran's threats, just as they've kept their cool about Hamas' terrorist attacks and "homemade" missiles. But in the long run, no people can live with the danger of being hit by a nuclear bomb.

For their part, the Iranians know that their threat of force, if credible enough, is just as effective as the actual employment of the threatened means. They don't need to attack Israel; it's enough to float the threat. Israel is not going to collapse overnight, but it could erode with time -- through emigration, demoralization and economic decline. Who wants to live or invest in a country that may one day go up in an atomic mushroom cloud?

It would be great if Obama's strategy to involve Iran could work. It would be terrible if it doesn't. Looked at in the sober light of day, he hardly has a chance. But he's right to give it a shot.

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