

## Blog Post: Iran, Iraq, and a Grand Middle East Strategy

Before launching this week's conversation, a word about its immediate predecessor, an exchange of views dealing in large part with the issue of non-violent resistance – specifically, by Palestinians. I generally refrain from talking much about the Palestinians; Israel itself provides more than ample material for our consideration. But this time, something niggles.

Fred Schlomke observes, quite accurately, that non-violent resistance by Palestinians – and by Israelis, too, for that matter, such as it has been – has attracted little public notice and has often been put down harshly. My impression is that such resistance, when it has taken place, has been principally spontaneous. People gather as a home is to be demolished, or olive trees uprooted, or a new section of the separation fence built. And that is also what happened in Gaza and kicked off our exchange.

For my part, I've long wondered in particular about the participation of Palestinian workers in building Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

True, when you have a family to support and laying stone upon stone to build a Jewish settlement offers not only the best but also the only employment, it's hard to resist. Still, I wonder what might have happened had Saudi Arabia, for example – or people of the Palestinian Diaspora – subsidized a serious boycott of such construction. The sad truth of the matter is that even where there is sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians, there is little respect for the forms Palestinian resistance to occupation has taken. Standing on rooftops to cheer incoming Scuds? Dispatching suicide bombers? A proud nationalist movement ought try for more, and better. Instead, Palestinian nationalism has essentially been hijacked (and exploited) by a leadership too often corrupt or fanatic or both.

The non-news item of the week is Prime Minister Olmert's speech in Sdei Boker. On balance, I suppose it is a good thing that Mr. Olmert speaks of peace. But I fear he speaks fatuously, saying so little that one stifles a yawn. Neither substantively nor rhetorically is the speech in any way memorable. True, some of my friends in Israel believe the speech was unexpectedly dovish and should therefore be praised. But the wings of this dove were pretty much clipped at birth: "If a new Palestinian government is established – a government which will be committed to the principles of the Quartet, implement the roadmap and bring about the release of Gilad Shalit, I will invite Abu-Mazen [Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas] to meet with me immediately, in order to conduct a real, open, genuine and serious dialogue between us."

Read literally, that means that a serious conversation with the Palestinians will have to await implementation of the roadmap. That sounds very much like square one.

True, it also means a turn away from the sterile unilateralism that Olmert has thus far endorsed. But the conditions he asserts are so improbable that one is safe – I think – to take the speech as little if anything more than an effort to take a baby step on the high ground and to elicit a hug from his American sponsors.

Or perhaps Olmert is trying to preempt the anticipated fallout of the imminent release of the ISG (Iraq Study Group) report, due to be presented to the president on Wednesday, December 6.

Which brings me to this week's subject. What follows is adapted (and extended) from my December 1 column in the Forward. Generally, I refrain from cribbing from the one into the other, but there are times when it makes little sense to do otherwise. And in this space, of course, we have the advantage of being able to have some real back and forth. Accordingly, I welcome your reactions.

Crunch time approaches, as we have known for years it one day would. The texture of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is about to undergo a seismic shift. Very soon now, we will have the report of the Iraq Study Group, co-chaired by former secretary of state James Baker and former congressman Lee Hamilton. While no one can be certain just what the ISG will recommend, there is foundation to the persistent rumors that it will propose the involvement of Syria and Iran in resolving the Iraq crisis.

Given President Bush's stated views regarding both Syria and Iran, it is difficult at first blush to imagine that the administration in Washington will accept such a proposal. At the same time, given the ever-deepening disaster in Iraq and the urgent need to go beyond the idle hope that the Iraqis themselves will take control of their country, the president does not have an array of appealing alternatives at his disposal.

At this particularly ugly stage of the Iraq debacle, a stage that has brought the United States to near desperation in its search for a face-saving exit strategy, the readiness of Syria and Iran to become part of the solution will come, if at all, at a very high price.

No, that price will not include the destruction of Israel. Syria and Iran both know that neither the United States nor the EU – to say nothing of Israel itself – would agree to such a price. But those who have followed the careers of both Baker and Hamilton know that both have an abiding interest in resolving the Israel/Arab conflict. They are quite likely, therefore, to make a resolution of that conflict part of their proposal for ending the Iraq war. And just the other day we learned that, Steve Hadley, the National Security Advisor, hinted much the same in his leaked assessment of Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Malaki. Among Hadley's recommendation to the president: "Direct your cabinet to begin an intensive press on Saudi Arabia to play a leadership role on Iraq, connecting this role with other areas in which Saudi Arabia wants to see U.S. action."

When Yitzhak Rabin endorsed the Oslo process, he did not do so out of an excess of dovish sentiment. Rabin was, in fact, a peculiarly unsentimental man. He had a sophisticated strategic grasp: Following the end of the Cold War (1990), he came to believe that a window of opportunity had opened for Israel and that Israel, for its own safety and security, had to use that window before it closed. It would close, he believed, as Iraq (then) and Iran (then and now) became serious regional powers.

Now it closes. Here are Iraq and Iran and Syria, too, potential key players in the resolution of America's most aggravated current crisis, and now, through a back door that could not have been

predicted during Rabin's time, substantially more directly involved in the "other" Middle East crisis, the chronic Israel-Palestine conflict.

For months now, Israel's political leaders have been beating the Iran drum, seeking to warn the world of Iran's malicious intentions and its gathering capacity to pursue those intentions, calling for decisive action to blunt the threat. Yet there is zero prospect that America will decide to destroy that capacity through military action. American intelligence cannot be certain it knows where all Iran's nuclear projects are taking place, and it certainly does not know the location of all Iran's strategic missiles. Even a spectacularly successful bombing raid against Iran would need to be followed up by ground troops, and that is simply not going to happen. (I say all this notwithstanding the very different and very chilling view of America's intentions in Iran as described by Seymour Hersh in last week's New Yorker.)

Hence diplomacy, likely on a grand scale, a search to resolve as many of the destabilizing regional issues as possible. If Israel and the Palestinians are hopelessly stuck – they are – pull them, kicking and screaming as they will, into some sort of comprehensive settlement of their conflict, most likely based broadly on the Saudi-Arab League proposal that Israel has stonewalled since its first articulation in 2002.

So Olmert, with his choked endorsement of the Saudi proposal – the

It is neither friendship nor enmity toward Israel that will prompt such an approach, but the emerging grand strategy for the Middle East, as also a rising impatience with a conflict that, always lethal, has now become tedious – and a declining confidence that Hamas, Abbas, and Olmert will suddenly find their own way toward peace, the new and surprising six-month cease-fire notwithstanding.

Now, if all that is a plausible prediction, then seeing Olmert's speech as a preemptive move makes sense. Here, for example, if Olmert on the Saudi initiative: "We will seek the assistance of those neighboring Arab States which strive for a peaceful solution to the conflict between us, including: the Kingdom of Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, in order to benefit from their experience and receive backing for direct negotiations between us. The voices emanating from those States regarding the need for recognition and normalization of relations with the State of Israel – including, for example, some parts in the Saudi peace initiative – are positive, and I intend to invest efforts in order to advance the connection with those States and strengthen their support of direct bilateral negotiations between us and the Palestinians."

Head Baker/Hamilton off at the pass. Say you'll pull out of settlements, endorse a viable Palestinian state, promise prosperity – all conditional, and then keep your fingers crossed that once again, the other side will mess up. Buy time, which has long been Olmert's way. (It seems to be al-Maliki's as well. Iraq will take charge of its own security by this coming June? Humbug.)

One may lament or celebrate the prospect of a solution essentially imposed. One may lay principal blame on Israel's failures, on the Palestinians', or at the feet of the international

community – especially the United States. Or one may choose to refrain from blame, instead welcoming an imperfect peace as an option more appealing than today's hopeless misery – unless, improbably, the cease-fire leads to productive negotiations.

As to those who prefer to argue who it was that threw the first stone, or the most recent stone, they are delusional if they see any purpose to their pursuit. Who cares? By now there have been so many stones the skies are dark. No new sun will be summoned by those who spend their time counting and tagging the stones.