

CONTRARY to popular impressions, persons concerned with an eventual real peace between Israel and the Palestinians should not be so concerned with reviving the so-called "Mubarak plan", or with the American efforts to get the Israelis and Egyptians talking in Cairo, or even with pushing for an American peace initiative at this particular time.

There are times in history when the best thing one can do to further an eventual real peace is simply to step up the heat, let the pot boil awhile, not give the recalcitrant party an easy way out.

We are now living through precisely one of those times. And for this reason the current Egyptian-American efforts to continually find convoluted ways to bring the Israelis into some kind of Cairo or Washington talks that can be claimed to be in furtherance of a "peace process" are so misguided (at best), duplicitous (at worst).

Both Egypt and the US of course, really have their own reasons for wanting to give the distinct impression, however superficial and hollow, that there really is a serious "peace process" underway.

For the Egyptians the situation is far more desperate than is usually discussed. Economically Egypt has been slowly but surely approaching a very serious crisis, which top officials there well understand, could become Mubarak's undoing.

Consequently Egyptian policies, orchestrated by long-time adviser Osama El-Baz, are primarily to present a good image to the Americans in hopes of achieving further American assistance — both at the level of overt financial help as well as behind-the-scenes efforts to

# Let the Israelis squirm for a while

keep the Egyptian political apparatus working.

The Egyptians are further concerned, of course, with controlling the volatility of the Palestinian national movement by giving the public impression of working hard to facilitate a political settlement. And Yasser Arafat too needs to buy more time for his failed efforts. Consequently there is something of an Arafat-Egyptian alliance at this particular time in history — a marriage of convenience unlikely to survive the strains of future events.

For just as at Camp David a decade ago, the real Egyptian motivations, and the only realistic expectations, are in the areas of pure self-interest and retention of power in Cairo. Notions of making any real breakthrough that could truly help the Palestinians are very much secondary — however much rhetoric obscures this reality.

Both El-Baz and Butros Ghali, the Foreign Ministry official given a lot of the public assignments in lieu of real power, are the very same persons who lead Egypt down the Camp David

road; and they would have no qualms about a second Camp David that would buy the Israelis still more time if it brought them with it more money and power in Cairo.

As for the Americans, the underlying reality is that the Bush administration is nearly totally paralysed in regard to Israel. Washington is infiltrated at the highest levels with the most diehard pro-Israeli and anti-Palestinian personalities — including the most senior officials at the National Security Council and the State Department. The views and chicanery of Henry Kissinger remain prevalent here, though the style itself is more than of careful and canniving George Bush, Jim Baker, and behind them Larry Eagleburger.

Furthermore, Washington is preoccupied with a great variety of other problems — so much so that the Intifada, Israel, and even the whole Mid-east are nowhere near the top of the priority list. Unless Washington is made to feel that its own vital interests are threatened, unless Washington is made to feel se-

rious political pain, it is most unlikely this situation will change anytime in the foreseeable future.

And this is precisely where the "Mubarak Plan" fits into the picture. For in reality what has been going on these past few months has been cooked up mostly in Washington, not Cairo. Indeed senior State Department official Dennis Ross brought the early outlines of what is now being called the "Mubarak Plan" with him from Washington when he visited the region earlier this year.

Yitzhak Rabin hinted at all this behind-the-scenes American manoeuvring on October 10 when he told a Knesset hearing that it was the US which was partially responsible for the current impasse by not being "completely sincere" with Israel about what has been going on.

Rabin explained — as one more step in furthering his own political fortunes in Israel — that it was Washington which had in the first place prodded Egypt to come forward with the "Mubarak Plan" but then failed to fully and aggressively embrace it

when Shamir balked.

Of course, what Rabin didn't say is that another crucial part of this equation is Washington's quiet manoeuvring to help Israel's Labour Party get back on top, in the misguided belief that the Labour will be other than a bit more crafty in dealing with Palestinian nationalism.

Indeed, an important aspect of what is being discussed as the "Mubarak Plan" is an Egyptian-American-Labour Party-American-Jewish effort to portray Shamir and Likud in a negative light and Shimon Peres with Rabin and the Labour Party as the party willing and able to do a deal. Just as before the last election, Arafat made all kinds of noises designed to help labour: now in the run-up to another Israeli election the same basic game is being played — though always in a "deniable" form.

When politicians don't have the guts or vision to do something serious to respond to the fleeting historical moment, they revert to such efforts at political musical chairs. Unfortunately

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## From



Mark A. Bruzonsky

## Washington

the roots of the Israeli-Palestinian quagmire are far deeper than such manoeuvres and cannot possibly be extracted within such a framework.

But back to Rabin. Thinking America could seriously be counted on to pursue what has been in essence its own plan, Rabin recently ran to Cairo eagerly positioning himself with public opinion as the supposedly flexible and reasonable party, in opposition to Shamir's tough line. For Rabin is engaged in an effort to unseat lacklustre Peres and take power again in Israel himself. The feud between the two Labour leaders is extremely deep going back even beyond the mid-1970s when Rabin lost the leadership of the Labour to Peres and Labour lost control of Israel.

For this basic reason Rabin has purposely courted his schizoid image — the tough-guy thug as defence minister (for one segment of the Israeli public that identifies on the whole with Likud) and the flexible advocate of "negotiations" and "elections" (for those who still cling to the fading Labour party).

Of course, all this political bantering suits the current American interest which is primarily to divert attention from the escalating brutality of Israel's putting down of the Intifada and the continuing Israeli efforts to push forward with the de facto annexation of the occupied territories.

Unable because of domestic political pressures to act boldly and decisively, Washington remains both paralysed and caught in Israel's web. Unwilling to change this situation because of who has power in the Bush administration Washington's ways of responding to public concerns is by trying to put distance between popular perceptions of what is going on and actual realities.

The only real current goal here in Washington — as in Egypt and Israel but for different reasons — is also to buy time, to deflect pressures, to hope for a breakthrough at low cost while not taking any real risks. Better to let "Shamir plan" and "Mubarak Plan" and Arafat gambits come and go while

dominating the headlines than let George Bush or Jim Baker get themselves entangled in the thicket of Mid-east intrigue from which few emerge unscathed — all this is the unspoken motto here.

Under these complicated and convoluted circumstances, the best prescription those who care about an eventual real peace can offer — especially to the Egyptians — is to stop giving the Israelis a false way out, stop giving them hope for a Camp David II, stop filling the daily news with empty talk of a potential political breakthrough when in reality the entire peace process is totally blocked by Israel.

Letting the Israelis squirm; letting the pot boil; letting world public opinion continue to take its course; letting friction continue to build between segments of American opinion and Israel — this is how to respond to today's situation and this is what the government in Cairo would be doing if the basic concern were setting the stage for an eventual true Israeli-Palestinian settlement rather than another diplomatic disaster.