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Rabin, autonomy, are trouble for Palestine

WASHINGTON, D.C. - There's a dangerous notion at the moment in the political air and it could eventually, some months or years down the road, lead to political disaster.

It's a notion first propogated by many American officials themselves looking for a little quick relief, and also by a lot of American Jews desperate to find some way to defuse U.S.-Israeli tensions and the polarization within their own ranks.

And it's a notion also endorsed - in some cases overtly, in many cases covertly - by a considerable number of Israelis who think that they can themselves get off the political hook on which their country hangs at the moment with a few clever political deceptions and semantic twists of hand.

And, sad to say, it's a notion that some Arabs have themselves bought into. For some Arabs - especially those who have bought into the American dream and see Washington as stability guarantor for their regimes - continue to place their hopes in the idea that if just something (even something minor and tangential) can at least be achieved now in the "peace talks" then somehow there's more hope for more progress in the future.

Now that Yitzhak Rabin and the Labor Party are coming back to power in Israel this dangerous notion - the "autonomy" concept - has taken on a momentum that may be difficult to prevent; even if in the end the rail on which today's Middle East political trains are moving leads to a cliff.

Of course in reality this is the very same Rabin as in "break their bones" and "iron fist" - slogans attached to him quite recently actually when he was Yitzhak Shamir's Defense Minister in charge of brutalizing the Palestinians into submission. But political moeds have a way of making people forget the past and substitute prayers and hopes in a process that minimizes realities.

So here's the rub of the historic moment. The long-touted "autonomy trap" may be about to be sprung. And the chances that such Bantunization of the Palestinians will lead to a real and just peace rather than to a temporary fix that will in the end result in even more virulent eruptions may be far slimmer than many are today prepared to admit.

At the same time that Nelson Mandela leads the blacks of South Africa in a diplomatically nuanced, sophisticated, tough but ultimately compromising and conciliatory manner, the Palestinians conduct themselves with far more political naivete, constantly allowing themselves to be taken in by rhetorical flourishes, grand promises and political illusions.

This dichotomy is far more than just a difference in style. It's more a divergence of temperament and sophistication. It's a difference between what might be termed today's Arab establishment collective personality - one of submission and accommodation - and the contemporary black African personality - one of rebellion and assertiveness.

James Baker, the American Secretary of State, has of course been the traveling salesman who is primarily responsible for having brought about today's situation - who has created what seems like the inextricable movement in the direction of what in the end is likely to be false autonomy and a Camp

David II-type deal.

Politicians look for short-term fixes; statesmen for just, lasting solutions. And today's world - not only in Washington but throughout Middle Eastern capitals as well - is full of politicians.

Baker's primary motivation has been far more fear that things could get out of hand throughout the Middle East region than the far more serious and difficult purpose of honestly pursuing a true and just peace.

For in the wake of America's unprecedented military intervention in Middle Eastern affairs and the still continuing destruction of Iraq, the Americans clearly concluded that it was vital to somehow get the Palestinian monkey off their back - at least for a while. And many of the Arab rulers who cooperated with Washington to destroy Baghdad and overall to "manage" regional affairs are even more of this opinion.

Since the Americans were not willing to confront the Israelis and bring about the two-state settlement so much of the world has advocated for so long, something of a lesser nature was clearly called for and had to be attempted.

[And by way of note at this point it's only fair to add here that even had the Americans decided that the time had come to impose an Arab-Israeli peace and bring about Palestinian as well as Israeli self-determination, it's not likely the Bush Administration had either the gumption or the ability to actually accomplish such a major historic step. Simply put, competing centers of political power, mostly within the U.S. itself, would have fought Bush and Baker all the way; and in the end it is they rather than the Administration that would have in all probability prevailed. Moreover, the Israelis have far too much American dirty linen they've been accumulating for just such a possible political confrontation - and this reality as well continually acts as a major deterrent against such coercive moves on the part of Washington, especially George Bush's Washington, which inherited not only its own skeletons but those of the preceding administration as well.]

And so, it fell on the shoulders of the American Secretary of State, James Baker, to sell some other course of action. And that he did, masterfully, getting one concession after another from the Arab side while pretending at times that the Israelis too were giving something important.

It was this context, of course, which accounted for James Baker's incessant shuttling back and forth to the Middle East last year. And in the end Baker did in fact bring about something of a political coup for which one would have thought the Israelis would have been much more grateful than they have been. Or is it all something of a charade anyway?

Not only was the very United Nations that had sanctioned the war against Iraq and which had been intimately involved with the Palestinian issue since its birth completely



by MARK A. BRUZONSKY

shoved out of the way; so were the very notions of international law, international conference, self-determination and PLO. How convenient!

Indeed, by the time sweet-talking Baker had finished, the Arabs (Palestinian aristocrats in the lead), had agreed to go first to Madrid and then into an endless series of rather numbing "talks" and "dialogues" EVEN WHILE the Israelis kept building illegal settlements (actually escalating their pace!) and EVEN WHILE the Israelis insisted on "approving" the Palestinian negotiators in addition to their own.

And this brings us to this moment with the Israeli Labor Party - the very party that brought us all today's problems in the first place - somehow looking good after all these years of the Likud. But this is definitely a case where looks are most deceiving. The Likud's style is that of out-front intransigent going way back to the days of Jabotinsky and the Stern Gang; whereas Labor has a long history of similar policies more nicely discussed, going way back to Ben-Gurion and the Palmack.

Autonomy as envisioned by a majority of the Israeli establishment, and that includes the main segments of both the Likud and the Labor parties, is not only thought to be the possible death-knell for Palestinian nationalism but possibly as well the opening bell for a fracturing of Palestinian society and an eventual Palestinian civil war.

Once into the autonomy trap - so the thinking goes - the Palestinians may well find that they have no way out. And by the time another five or 10 years have passed the possibility that the Palestinians can rise again to fight may have been lost forever plus the occupied territories will be even more irrevocably tied to an Israel swollen further by Soviet immigrants.

True enough, others see the "autonomy" concept through different lenses, including good friends of mine. But for what it's worth I offer these words of warning from one who truly hopes that an honest and just way will be found, before it is too late, for both Israeli and Palestinian national aspirations to flourish... as should have been the case long ago.

But then as now, I fear, by failing to grapple with the basic questions and offering instead false cures, the ground is only being laid for even more misery and conflict in years still ahead.

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