

Israel is seeking 'more time'

US expects no breakthrough in near future

THE "big push" is on to breathe new diplomatic life back into the rather stalemated Arafat peace initiative, now approaching its first birthday.

This "big push" comes in the form of the "Mubarak Plan"; one the Americans are now co-operating with because they have nothing of their own to offer and because they know no serious political breakthrough is likely in the foreseeable future (even though it is always useful for politicians to hint at such possibilities).

Official Washington is also glad to co-operate with Mubarak because there is an unspoken awareness here that what Mubarak has come forward with is pretty basic and pretty harmless, but nevertheless very useful in that it gives the press something to write about (other than the increasing bondage of the Palestinians) while at the same time giving the public some reason to think about a "peace process" that is more illusory than actual.

In cold real politics terms, the 10-points of what is being called the Mubarak Plan really should be viewed more a desperation effort on the part of pro-American-Arab moderates than as a step with any serious likelihood of leading to an important political breakthrough. Mubarak is

in the lead for all of those who have all along urged Yasser Arafat to play the American game and who continue to argue major results are still possible even though earlier expectations haven't panned out.

In actual reality what Hosni Mubarak has offered has nearly nothing new to it except for a somewhat better public relations effort, something the Egyptians are a bit more adept at now than in previous times.

And though the Israelis are squabbling among themselves and seemingly confused by Mubarak's efforts, these matters have more to do with party politics among warring Israeli clicks (and manoeuvring for the upcoming Israeli elections) than true peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

The Israelis are indeed playing hard to get — that's always a good strategy if you know that you're going to have to buy into something pretty soon but before doing so you want the other party to lower his expectations and prices as much as possible. And the Arab side in general does have a history of being out-bargained and out-foxed on the political chessboard.

But if and when the Israelis do agree to some kind of talks in Egypt realistic expectations should be very minimal about their outcome. What is likely to

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ensue, if the Palestinians go along with the charade, is an extended process of talks leading essentially nowhere over a considerable period of time. The likelihood of eventual breakdown is far greater than that of real progress.

Indeed the whole Mubarak strategy, which Arafat is trying to support even while many within the PLO are increasingly sceptical, seems in many ways flawed.

Most troubling of all is that the Israelis are shrewdly manoeuvring to get multiple pay-offs for agreeing to what, it can be reasonably argued, is really in their own interests in the first place and the best of many worse options available to them.

For if and when talks do begin in Cairo they will formally exclude the PLO, they will be limited to talking about "elections" under Israeli occupation, they will be under the American thumb at a time when the American government is firmly in Israel's camp, and they will be linked to the "Camp David" imagery.

Such talks will not have to their core an acceptance of even the notion of Palestinian nationalism, they will not deal with the crucial subject of what is to come after such unprecedented "elections under occupation", nor will they deal

in any way with the crucial issue of Palestinian self-determination which is, after all, what the Intifada is supposed to be all about. As President George Bush has recently been quoted telling Shamir, Mubarak's 10-points "bind no one to anything."

And yet, such talks will co-opt the political moment and dominate the public discourse — a big plus for the Israelis.

Furthermore, the multiple pay-offs Israel is manoeuvring for, in addition to the most crucial issue of buying themselves more time, are along the following lines:

- The PLO will once again will be pushed from the foreground into the background with the public imagery that Egypt and America are again determining who speaks for the Palestinians and about what;

- The notion of "elections under occupation" will further be pushed forward to replace that of the urgently required Israeli-Palestinian negotiations for mutual recognition;

- The earlier focus on an international peace conference will be undermined while Arab unity will be further endangered (especially in regard to Syria);

- The Israeli government of Yitzcak Shamir will be portrayed as not only a tough bargainer but as the party that in the end knows how to be both strong and flexible; thus the reasonable choice for careful Israelis as they get ready to choose again between the Labour and the Likud;

- Speaking about elections, once the talks begin Shamir will be in a position to bring them about at a time when he can undermine the Labour's basic argument that the Likud is inflexible and cannot bring about negotiations to solve the Intifada;

- The talks in Egypt are likely to be dragged out for quite some time, further undermining reporting about the Intifada and

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making possible further Israeli efforts to bring the "rebellion" under control;

- Under the guise of Israel's "co-operating" in a re-invigorated peace process the Bush Administration and the American Congress are preparing to go forward with preposition more than \$100 million in military supplies in Israel plus granting Israel money and loan guarantees for "resettling" Soviet Jews on both sides of the green line — more pluses for the Likud's election hopes;

- Most importantly of all the urgent momentum that should have been insisted upon after the historic Palestinian initiative of 1988 will be further dissipated as the Israelis return the forum to Cairo, twist the subject from self-determination to "elections under occupation", and await changes in the make-up of the PLO or the composition of power in the region.

For all of these reasons there should be considerable apprehension that what Mubarak is promoting with such vigour might actually be playing right into Israeli designs while giving the Americans more time on the side-lines and while also allowing the Americans to appear far less one-sided than they really are.

For Israel's basic goal at this particular time in history is "more time" — more time to put down and wear down the Intifada, more time for the world to get used to Israel's new methods of control and repression, more time for the Israeli military to build-up its weaponry especially with new spy satellites and anti-missile missiles, more time to settle the nagging Likud-Labour split, and more time for Israeli leaders to pick and choose their own timing for their own next moves.

Next week more on how the "big push" behind the "Mubarak Plan" is really viewed from here in the American capital.



Hosni Mubarak



Arafat



Shamir