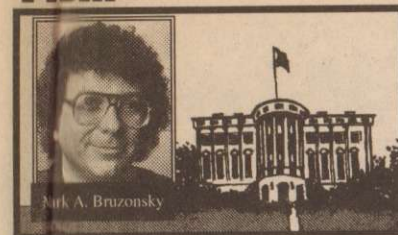


The big push on Damascus

From



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Washington

THE BIG PUSH IS ON AGAIN.

This time it's a push to bring none other than Hafez Al-Assad, the long-time Syrian strong man, to the White House lawn.

A hand-shake with his counterpart down the street in the chaotic Mid-east, none other than Israel's current head man, Yitzhak Rabin, is what the political choreographers in the US and Israel are working overtime to bring about.

And no matter what the newspapers are saying, there's definitely a bit of a hurry ... for Al-Assad can't last forever and without him it's doubtful anyone else in Syria would be able to sign quickly a serious peace with Israel.

Add to this the political reality that image-wise, the Clinton administration's foreign policy track record isn't really all that good.

Bosnia is a terrible disaster with the situation in the former Yugoslavia seems destined to get worse throughout the Clinton years. Somalia is a place everyone here in Washington seems to want to forget and from which the Americans are withdrawing as quietly as they can. And who knows what's going to happen to Boris Yeltsin and the new Russia where the economic catastrophe unleashed with the West's encouragement — but without much of the promised help — could still result in a major political backlash.

In this situation, orchestrating an Israeli-Syrian deal, and after that an Israeli-Jordanian peace, is what the Clinton foreign policy team is clearly shooting for and that's what explains the very unusual Clinton-Assad meeting a few days ago.

And so, in short, with key Israeli operatives at the White House and State Department relentlessly pushing forward in this direction at Israel's behest, the big push is on.

Yet however much the Clinton administration's foreign policy operatives are attempting to propel events in this direction, the Labour Party's goals in Israel are even more assertive in attempting to broker a historic Israeli-Syrian peace treaty.

No matter how much they may seem to protest, no matter how much Rabin plays the role of reluctant suitor with considerable credibility, the basic truth is that

things are going for the Israelis far better than they had thought possible just a few years ago and they are extremely eager to get Syria's signature on a deal while Al-Assad remains president.

Yitzhak Shamir and the Likud reluctantly opened the door to recent developments in what was a very uneasy dance with the Bush administration. But they intended to stay in control of Israeli politics; not to pass the baton to Rabin. Indeed, playing along at Madrid as at the time considered to be part of the price of staying in power.

Still, the Madrid conference, taking place as it did in the aftermath of the Coalition War against Iraq, really was convened very much on Israeli terms. And Likud shouting notwithstanding, all that has happened since has only underscored Israel's dominant position politically as well as militarily.

In an international variant of the classic "good-cop-bad-cop" ploy, Rabin and his Labour gang then came to power — with American backing as everyone knows. And these "good guy" Israelis then quickly proceeded to manipulate the Madrid-created situation into a series of behind-the-scenes bilateral negotiations with all the major Arab parties, including the PLO.

Far more skillful at diplomacy, far more devious in the art of political chicanery, the Labour nevertheless has the same basic goals for Israel as does the Likud: retention of most of the occupied territories, separate peace treaties with all the Arab parties, secondary Bantustan-type status for the Palestinians, and Israel's regional strategic and economic hegemony as America's primary regional partner.

This is, after all, the same Labour Party that David Ben-Gurion founded. Foreign Minister Shimon Peres is himself one of Ben-Gurion's primary disciples. Back in the 1930s and 1940s, it was Ben-Gurion who kept proclaiming that the Jewish "Yishuv" had no intention of establishing a Jewish state. Now, half a century later, the Labour-led Israelis are busy corraling the Palestinians onto reservations with feigned concern for their welfare.

At least those who lead the Likud have usually acted honestly in their racist and militarist policy, expressing their disdain

for the Palestinians and their contempt for the Arabs. Labour has always been a far more devious political animal — though with much the same convictions in the end — and hence exceedingly more dangerous.

After the switch in Israel, then the political landscape changed once again, just about a year ago now, with Clinton's takeover in the US. Immediately taking advantage of this new situation the Israelis have been riding high ever since, for they had infiltrated the Clinton presidential campaign big-time and right from the start they knew that they practically own this American administration and could do with it pretty much what they will.

Sure, the Israelis can't quite get everything they want. The push to get Jonathan Pollard out of prison hasn't succeeded, not yet anyway. But that's really small potatoes with Rabin just going through the motions.

The key issues are the major strategic and economic ones. What kind of regimes will be in power in the major Mid-east country? What kinds of arrangements will be made for oil, petrodollars, and

capital investment? Who will be selling arms to whom and in what quantities? What role with the Israelis play in the strategic "stability" of the region and how closely will occupied Jerusalem be linked to American interests and strategies?

These matters are of the highest historic importance. How these matters are resolved in the crucial Mid-east region will help determine major economic realities in the entire Western world, especially in the US. And so, dealing with Syria during this window-in-time period during which Al-Assad is in charge is a very major Israeli and American priority. And that of course is what explains President Clinton's quite extraordinary nearly daylong meeting with Al-Assad on the final day of his recent European trip.

