

U.S. must live up to role as Mideast honest broker

■ Day after U.N. action, Obama should take lead

By EDWARD P. DJEREJIAN

AFTER years of stalemate in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, the Palestinians have turned to the United Nations in a dramatic bid to improve their diplomatic and legal standing vis-à-vis Israel. Palestine currently has “observer” status at the U.N. and is seeking an elevated status within the organization by obtaining recognition as a “state” through a Security Council resolution, which the United States has pledged to veto, or by pursuing nonmember observer state status through the General Assembly. By gaining even symbolic recognition of statehood at the U.N., the Palestinians could shift the language of debate to that of an occupation of one state by another. But the key question is what happens the day after?

The Palestinian action at the U.N. will be met with widespread popular support in the Middle East and elsewhere and will raise unfounded expectations that Palestinian statehood is within reach. The cold reality is that the real path toward an independent Palestinian state is through direct negotiations with Israel for a two state solution. If the Palestinian bid for statehood at the U.N. remains just that, a symbolic step without actual negotiations between the parties, then the day after scenario could become destabilizing.

There can be little doubt that if there is a prolonged negotiating void in the months following the U.N. action, there will be popular rallies and, initially, peaceful protests around Israel's borders against its occupation of the Palestinian “state,” not just “territories.” Indeed, the Israeli defense establishment reportedly is already preparing for this contingency. As the demonstrations by Palestinians in countries neighboring Israel this year have shown, these peaceful protests can quickly become deadly, with the risks of escalation all too probable. This may not constitute a “Third Intifada,” but it would exacerbate an already volatile security situation in the region. As already indicated by the Saudis, strong Arab objections also will be raised against any U.S. veto of a Security Council resolution supporting Palestinian statehood.

Coupled with the “Arab Awakening” and the popular unrest in the region, Israel will find itself increasingly isolated. The Palestinian issue has always played a central role in Middle East politics and will gain even greater importance in the Arab street at a time when ruling elites and governments must pay close attention to public opinion.

Such a scenario obviously does not serve the national security interests of the United States or the international community. Nor does it serve the interests of the Palestinians and the Israelis and their neighbors. So what may be done?

The United States has a major role to play in close coordination with the international community to get the parties to direct negotiations. Much work has been done in past negotiations on the key issues of territory, security, Palestinian refugees, Jerusalem and normalization of relations with Israel (e.g., The Arab Peace Initiative of 2002.) The overall contours of an Israeli-Palestinian two-state solution have been on the negotiating table for years. What has been lacking is the political will and leadership to complete the job.

For a crisis to be turned into an opportunity, the president of the United States should invite the prime minister of Israel and the president of the Palestinian Authority to Washington. He can put forth a proposal outlining either the principles or a framework of a final status Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement directly linked to a detailed time line for negotiations on the key issues. The support of the international community could be incorporated in a subsequent multilateral peace conference like the one in Madrid that 20 years ago launched direct, face-to-face negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

If ever there was a moment for strong leadership to protect and advance our national security interests in the Mideast, it is now. What happens at the U.N. can be exploited in a positive way to get the parties engaged in sustained and conclusive peace negotiations. Still, the naysayers will realistically cite the political obstacles. These include: Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's reluctance to engage in meaningful negotiations given his narrow right-wing base and the powerful voice of the Israeli settlers in his government's councils; Palestinian President Abbas' ability to deliver a peace agreement given his internal political challenges, especially



with Hamas; and President Obama's willingness now to take a leading position to get the parties to the table given daunting domestic challenges at home with the economy and an upcoming presidential election in 2012.

President Obama began his administration with a principled position on Middle East peace. He engaged the Israelis and the Palestinians on the issues of territory and security as a prelude to engagement on the final status issues. These include Palestinian refugees, Jerusalem, end of claims and state-to-state relations. These efforts can be built upon. At the Baker Institute, we produced a report in 2010 — “Getting to the Territorial Endgame of an Israeli-Palestinian Settlement” — that we provided to the negotiating parties. It demonstrated that, with U.S. assistance, hard compromises between Israelis and Palestinians can be achieved on the issues of borders, Israeli settlements and land swaps. The point is that these issues can be resolved with the necessary determination and political will of the parties.

With an agreed upon framework introduced by the United States for negotiations that comprehensively and objectively spells out the legitimate interests of both sides and the political horizon or “end game,” coupled with benchmarks for negotiations, there is a possibility to move peace talks forward. Simply put, the United States has to live up to its role as an honest broker.

This suggested approach could turn a looming crisis into a way forward to resolve this core conflict in the Middle East. It would bolster United States credibility in the region, lessen Israel's isolation, keep the Arab Awakening focused on broadening political participation, social and economic justice in the Arab world and, thereby, help to marginalize the forces of extremism in the region. This is a time for strategic thinking and political courage, not just crisis management.

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A sap for having faith in hope, change pledge



DAVID BROOKS says the president has abandoned the Reasonable Man approach to governing and reverted to the politics-as-usual approach.

I'M a sap, a specific kind of sap. I'm an Obama Sap.

When the president said the unemployed can't wait 14 more months for help and we had to do something right away, I believed him. When administration officials called around saying that the possibility of a double-dip recession was horrifyingly real and that it would be irresponsible not to come up with a package that could pass right away, I believed them.

I liked Obama's payroll tax cut ideas and urged Republicans to play along. But of course I'm a sap. When the president unveiled the second half of his stimulus it became clear that this package has nothing to do with helping people right away or averting a double dip. This is a campaign marker, not a jobs bill.

It recycles ideas that couldn't get passed even when Democrats controlled Congress. In his remarks Monday the president didn't try to win Republicans to even some parts of his measures. He repeated the populist cries that fire up liberals but are designed to enrage moderates and conservatives.

He claimed we can afford future Medicare costs if we raise taxes on the rich. He repeated the old half-truth about millionaires not paying as much in taxes as their secretaries. (In reality, the top 10 percent of earners pay nearly 70 percent of all income taxes, according to the IRS. People in the richest 1 percent pay 31 percent of their income to the federal government while the average worker pays less than 14 percent, according to the Congressional Budget Office.)

This wasn't a speech to get something done. This was the sort of speech that sounded better when Ted Kennedy was delivering it. The result is that we will get neither short-term stimulus nor long-term debt reduction anytime soon, and I'm a sap for thinking it was possible.

Yes, I'm a sap. I believed Obama when he said he wanted to move beyond the stale ideological debates that have paralyzed this country. I always believe that Obama is on the verge of breaking out of the conventional categories and embracing one of the many bipartisan reform packages that are floating around.

But remember, I'm a sap. The White House has clearly decided that in a town of intransigent Republicans and mean ideologues, it has to be mean and intransigent too. The president was stung by the liberal charge that he was outmaneuvered during the debt-ceiling fight. So the White

House has moved away from the Reasonable Man approach or the centrist Clinton approach.

It has gone back, as an appreciative Ezra Klein of The Washington Post conceded, to politics as usual. The president is sounding like the Al Gore for President campaign, but without the earth tones. Tax increases for the rich! Protect entitlements! People versus the powerful! I was hoping the president would give a cynical nation something unconventional, but, as you know, I'm a sap.

Being a sap, I still believe that the president's soul would like to do something about the country's structural problems. I keep thinking he's a few weeks away from proposing serious tax reform and entitlement reform. But each time he gets close, he rips the football away. He whispered about seriously reforming Medicare but then opted for changes that are worthy but small. He talks about fundamental tax reform, but I keep forgetting that he has promised never to raise taxes on people in the bottom 98 percent of the income scale.

That means when he talks about raising revenue, which he is right to do, he can't really talk about anything substantive. He can't tax gasoline. He can't tax consumption. He can't do a comprehensive tax reform. He has to restrict his tax policy changes to the top 2 percent, and to get any real revenue he's got to hit them in every which way. We're not going to simplify the tax code, but by God Obama's going to raise taxes on rich people who give to charity! We've got to do something to reduce the awful philanthropy surplus plaguing this country!

The president believes the press corps imposes a false equivalency on American politics. We assign equal blame to both parties for the dysfunctional politics when in reality the Republicans are more rigid and extreme. There's a lot of truth to that, but at least Republicans respect Americans enough to tell us what they really think. The White House gives moderates little morsels of hope, and then rips them from our mouths. To be an Obama admirer is to toggle from being uplifted to feeling used.

The White House has decided to wage the campaign as fighting liberals. I guess I understand the choice, but I still believe in the governing style Obama talked about in 2008. I may be the last one. I'm a sap.

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Will we roll up our sleeves or limp into the future?



THOMAS FRIEDMAN says he hopes that our politicians will rise to the challenge by putting forth fair and credible proposals for recovery.

IT becomes clearer every week that our country faces a big choice: We can either have a hard decade or a bad century. We can either roll up our sleeves and do what's needed to overcome our post-cold war excesses and adapt to the demands of the 21st century or we can just keep limping into the future.

Given those stark choices, one would hope that our politicians would rise to the challenge by putting forth fair and credible recovery proposals that match the scale of our debt problem and contain the three elements that any serious plan must have: spending cuts, increases in revenue and investments in the sources of our strength. But that, alas, is not what we're getting, which is why there remains an opening for an independent Third Party candidate in the 2012 campaign.

The Republicans have come nowhere near rising to our three-part challenge because the GOP is no longer a “conservative” party, offering a conservative for-

mula for U.S. renewal. The GOP has been captured by a radical antitax wing, and the party's leaders are too afraid to challenge it. What would real conservatives be offering now?

They would understand, as President Eisenhower did, that at this crucial hinge in our history we cannot just be about cutting. We also need to be investing in the sources of our greatness: infrastructure, education, immigration and government-funded research.

Real conservatives would understand that we cannot maintain our vital defense budget without an appropriate tax base. Real conservatives would understand that we can simplify the tax code, get rid of all the special-interest giveaways and raise revenues at the same time. Real conservatives would never cut taxes and add a new Medicare entitlement in the middle of two wars. And real conservatives would understand that the tea party has become the tea kettle party. It is people in real distress about our predicament letting off steam by

trying to indiscriminately cut everywhere. But steam without an engine — without a strategic plan for U.S. greatness based on spending cuts, tax reform and investments in tomorrow — will take us nowhere.

I've argued that the only way for President Obama to expose just how radical the GOP has become would be for the president to put out in detail his version of a credible “Grand Bargain” and then go sell it to the country. But that proposal had to include real long-term spending cuts in Medicare and Social Security so they can be preserved, tax reform that raises revenues by asking more of the rich — but also demands something from everyone — and an agenda for investing in our growth engines, like schools and infrastructure, right now to stimulate the economy today in ways that also increase our productivity for tomorrow. That plan should have been a combination of the Simpson-Bowles deficit reduction proposal and Obama's new jobs agenda announced last week.

Such a credible, fair “Obama Plan” for deficit reduction married to a credible jobs initiative would have captured America's radical center and made life very difficult for the GOP, which can't accept any tax increases. It was the only chance for maneuvering the GOP into a Grand Bargain.

Obama gave us the credible \$447 billion jobs program, but his deficit reduction plan announced Monday to pay for it and trim long-term spending does not rise

to the scale we need. It may motivate his base, but it will not attract independents and centrists and, therefore, it will not corner the Republicans.

As the Washington Post reported: “The latest Obama plan ‘doesn't produce any more in realistic savings than the plan they offered in April,’ said Maya MacGuineas, the president of the bipartisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget. ‘They've filled in details, repackaged it and replaced one gimmick with another. They don't even stabilize the debt. This is just not enough.’ The most disheartening development, MacGuineas and others said, is Obama's decision to count \$1.1 trillion in savings from the drawdown of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan toward his debt-reduction total. Because Obama has no intention of continuing war spending at last year's elevated levels, that \$1.1 trillion would never have been spent.”

My fading hope is that this is Obama's opening bid and enough Republicans will come to their senses and engage him again in a Grand Bargain. My fear is that both parties have just started their 2012 campaigns. In which case, the rest of us will just sit here, hostages to fortune, orphans of a political system gone mad, hunkering down for a bad century.

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