

## All charm and smiles

*With just that faint hint of menace.*



AFP

As the emissary of a new president ostensibly still in “listening mode”, Hillary Clinton was politesse personified during her first swing as secretary of state through the Middle East this week. Inevitably, however, the locals also listened attentively to their visitor, hoping for clues about the direction of American policy under Barack Obama not only towards Israel and the Palestinians but also towards Syria and Iran. In the event, she gave hints of both change and continuity—reassuring, disappointing or worrying, depending on the point of view of her various audiences.

For Israelis and Palestinians, the message was more continuity than change. Mrs Clinton wants to help Gaza recover from the battering it received during the recent war between Israel and Hamas. She attended an international meeting in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, which promised some \$4.5 billion in aid. But, for now, she seems determined to deal only with Mahmoud Abbas and his Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and not with Hamas, even though, despite Israel’s recent onslaught, the Islamists still control Gaza. If Hamas wants to talk, America continues to say, it must recognise Israel, renounce violence and accept previous deals signed by the Palestine Liberation Organisation—the conditions set down not only by America but also by the UN.

Music to Israel’s ears? Only up to a point. For the Egyptians are now once again coaxing Mr Abbas’s Fatah movement and Hamas into power-sharing talks that are set to launch in earnest next week and could, if successful, produce a Palestinian government that the rest of the world can deal with. Since the Gaza war, moreover, voices calling for accommodation with Hamas, even if it does not swallow all the required conditions, have grown louder in diplomatic circles, especially in Europe. And Mrs Clinton used her visit to make it clear to the incoming Likud-led government of Binyamin Netanyahu that if Israel wants to shun Hamas, it needs to make a better fist of co-operating with Mr Abbas. She emerged from a meeting in Ramallah with the Palestinian president on March 4th to deliver a stern reprimand to Israel for demolishing Palestinian homes in Jerusalem (but not, publicly, for its general policy of settlement in the West Bank).

Worse from the point of view of Mr Netanyahu may be the new administration's firm intention to reach out to Syria and Iran, two countries consigned by George Bush to an "axis of evil" but now targets for diplomatic "engagement" if they are willing to unclench their fists. The American State Department announced during Mrs Clinton's tour that she was sending the most senior American delegation for several years to Syria. This portends trouble in American-Israeli relations. Although many Israelis, including much of the defence establishment, support the idea of peace with Syria, Mr Netanyahu has set his face against paying the inevitable price, namely the return of the Golan Heights, captured in the 1967 war.

America's approach to Iran so far is warier. Mrs Clinton joined a chorus of local leaders warning Iran to stay out of Arab affairs. Mr Obama, it transpired this week, has written to the Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, noting that any reduction in the nuclear threat from Iran would reduce the need for America to deploy a missile-defence system that Russia loathes in eastern Europe. This appears to be an attempt to entice Russia into accepting tougher economic sanctions on Iran—part of the stick Mr Obama intends to brandish if the Iranians fail to grasp his dangled carrot of talks. Israel grumbles that if Iran talks to America at all it will do so just to play for time while perfecting its plans for nuclear weapons.

Mrs Clinton was careful to keep out of Israel's internal politics. She pledged to work closely with whatever government emerged at the end of Mr Netanyahu's still fraught coalition-building. But she did reiterate strongly America's commitment to a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine, an idea that Mr Netanyahu stolidly refuses to endorse, even though his obstinacy may prevent him from building the broad-based coalition he seeks.

Having encountered a second rebuff from Tzipi Livni in his efforts to form a broad government including her centrist Kadima party, Mr Netanyahu is now wooing Ehud Barak, the Labour leader, who does not conceal his desire to stay on at the defence ministry. But many in Kadima and Labour want nothing to do with Mr Netanyahu unless he accepts the need for a Palestinian state, not just the "economic peace" that he is offering. Mrs Clinton said nothing on her tour to undermine the idea that Israel remains a special friend. But on Gaza, settlements and engagement with Syria and Iran, a pricklier American relationship may now lie ahead.

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