

A grand bargain?

New governments in Israel and America could mean new ideas for peace in the Middle East.



Illustration by David Simonds

Asked about the hardy perennial of Palestinians and peace, officials in Israel's new government now reply with dire talk about Iran and the threat of nuclear war. "However much progress we might make on peace," says one, "it would all disintegrate if Iran achieved the ability to make a bomb and proliferate it."

That could be a diversionary tactic. After all, Binyamin Netanyahu, the new prime minister, spent much of his previous term in the job (1996-99) wriggling out of Israel's obligations under what was known as the Oslo peace process on various pretexts, to gratify his rightist-religious supporters. But it could also signal a readiness to consider a grand bargain: Iran defanged for Palestine decolonised.

Israelis and Americans, preparing for a first encounter between Mr Netanyahu and President Barack Obama next month, are increasingly focusing on the Iran-Palestine equation. Mr Obama's policy of trying to talk to Iran worries some Israeli policymakers. But there is also a growing awareness in Israel that the policy's chance of success, as well as the strength and effectiveness of Sunni Arab opposition to Shia Iran's nuclear ambitions, may hinge on America's ability to show progress on Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking.

That puts modest but unusual pressure on Mr Netanyahu from the Americans. Indeed, the Israelis may have to get used to being treated a little differently by Mr Obama's administration than they were by the previous one. For example, there had been plenty of indications that Mr Netanyahu might be visiting Mr Obama early in May, but the White House let it be known that the president was not available then. Jordan's King Abdullah, on the other hand, was hosted at the Obama White House on April 21st.

Peeved, Mr Netanyahu has embarked on a month-long "policy review". This, his aides say, means he cannot answer for the moment such niggling questions as whether he accepts the very concept of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In his campaign for the election in February, he spoke of "economic peace" rather than full political peace between two proper states. While not endorsing the Palestinians' right to a state, earlier this month Mr Netanyahu told George Mitchell, the new American special envoy to the Middle East, that he would insist on explicit Palestinian recognition of Israel as a "Jewish state". Mahmoud Abbas, head of the Palestinian Authority, has been loth to make this pronouncement. Mr Netanyahu says it is not a precondition for talking, but it is a "fundamental condition" for reaching agreement. His aides explain that recognition of Israel's Jewishness would imply a final renunciation of the claim to an unrestricted "right of return" for Palestinian

refugees. Israelis, left and right alike, insist that any "return" must be severely limited—by Israel—in order to protect the Jewish majority and Jewish national character of their country.

President Obama and Mr Mitchell have carefully woven "Jewish state" into their own recent public statements. But the Americans have reportedly reacted coldly to this early demonstration of Israeli casuistic recalcitrance, finding it reminiscent of the pretext-finding and foot-dragging of Mr Netanyahu's first administration.

This time, however, unlike then, Mr Netanyahu's team is not of one ideological stripe. It includes the Labour party, with its leader, Ehud Barak, as minister of defence. Mr Netanyahu was determined to bring Mr Barak in, so as to escape the political and arithmetical thrall of his own hardliners. Mr Barak for his part, say insiders, is determined to vindicate his decision to join, bitterly criticised within his own party, by vigorously pushing for peace. A former prime minister from 1999 to 2001, who offered Israel's boldest-yet concessions in an abortive negotiation for peace with the Palestinians brokered by President Bill Clinton, Mr Barak now advocates a "regional peace" effort.

Mr Barak does not need the spur of Iranian nuclear pretensions, say these insiders, to promote his peace agenda. But he assured Mr Mitchell that he is available to help persuade Mr Netanyahu of the merit of an Iranian bomb-for-Palestinian peace bargain.

This week, meanwhile, the Iranian connection loomed large and ugly, with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's tirade against Israel at a UN conference on racism triggering a walkout of delegates (see article).

As bad luck or perverse planning would have it, the incident came just before a ceremony at the Yad Vashem memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust in Jerusalem, on Holocaust Day. "We will not allow Holocaust deniers to carry out another holocaust against the Jewish people," Mr Netanyahu said.

Mr Netanyahu's officials say that Iran, because of the drop in oil prices and its consequent economic troubles, is now more than ever susceptible to international pressure to forgo its nuclear ambitions. He himself, more than any other Israeli politician, has harped since the mid-1990s on the threat to Israel of an Iranian bomb. Might that make him especially susceptible, despite his tough talk on the Palestinians, to American-led diplomacy that would seek to wrap Iran and Palestine in a grand regional peace bargain? Mr Obama and his advisers will be wondering as they brace themselves for a bout of Middle East diplomacy.

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