

Barack Obama makes his push for Palestine

I RETURN from holiday just in time to catch a briefing from a senior administration official on Barack Obama's success in at last persuading Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, to start direct talks with Israel's prime minister, "Bibi" Netanyahu. There is to be a grand opening in Washington on September 1st, attended by Messrs Abbas and Netanyahu, with Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Jordan's King Abdullah acting as chaperones. Talks between Israel and the Palestinians will then ensue, which the administration expects to reach completion, ie, agreement on a final peace settlement, within a year.

It is easy to be cynical about the scope of this supposed breakthrough. By getting the two sides back into direct talks Mr Obama has merely returned to where George Bush was after his Annapolis summit of November 2007. Big deal: the direct talks initiated then got nowhere, even though Israel's prime minister at the time, Ehud Olmert, was far readier for territorial compromise than is Mr Netanyahu. Even if, by some miracle, the two men came close to agreement, Hamas is still absent from the table.

This means that half of the Palestinian movement would not be party to any deal and will try hard to sabotage one. So indeed will those Israelis in Bibi's governing coalition who for reasons of ideology, security or both vehemently oppose the creation of a Palestinian state. It is better for the parties to be talking than not talking, but a betting man would not favour the chances of a breakthrough to peace.

That said, it would be a mistake to put the chances of success entirely at nil. When Mr Netanyahu and Mr Abbas hit the inevitable impasse, the Americans, who intend to be actively involved in the process through the person of George Mitchell, will doubtless table a bridging proposal. And this is the point at which the script could begin to depart from the precedent Mr Bush set at Annapolis.

Mr Bush left his push in Palestine to the end of his presidency, and with the Iraq war to fight never saw the peace process as much more than a distraction or palliative. Mr Obama, on the other hand, started early, and seems determined to persevere despite the pushback he ran into from Israel's friends in Congress after his brutal confrontation with Mr Netanyahu over settlements in the territories. America's president, in short, shows every sign of being a true believer in the necessity of solving this conflict, not least in order to redeem the promises he gave the Muslim world in his famous Cairo speech.

A year from now, when the negotiation "deadline" expires, he may be approaching the final year of his presidency—but for all the parties in the region know he might still have another four-year term ahead of him. That will make it more expensive for the Israelis or Palestinians to resist whatever bridging ideas America brings to the table.

Another point: America's relations with Israel are more than ever focused on the pressing question of Iran and its purported nuclear-weapons programme. The administration has been saying lately that even if the Iranians went hell-for-leather for a bomb right now, it would take them at least a year to build a single device.

This suggests that if Mr Netanyahu takes the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran half as seriously as he claims he does, he cannot risk being indifferent, especially over the coming year, to the quality of his relations with the superpower. The administration would surely never express the linkage this crudely, but there is here the making of a grand bargain: greater Israeli flexibility towards the Palestinians in return for ever-closer co-operation against the threat from Iran. As I said, a betting man would not favour the chances of a rapid breakthrough after the

Washington summit. The Hamas conundrum is a huge obstacle. But this meeting may turn out to be much more than a reprise of the Annapolis failure.

(Photo credit: AFP)

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