

The next tiny step



THE talks go on. After a long and anxious morning of meetings that was the message, wrapped in deliberately vague and intentionally uninformative prose, that the American peace envoy, George Mitchell, delivered to the media at Sharm el-Sheikh on Tuesday. There would be more talks (as planned), he said, on Wednesday in Jerusalem, between Israel's Binyamin Netanyahu and the Palestinians' Mahmoud Abbas, with America's secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, in close attendance. Then there would be further talks (unplanned) "in the coming days" between lower officials to prepare for yet another round between the leaders (also as yet unscheduled, and considered dangerously iffy given the still-unresolved stand-off over Israel's settlement building).

The process of direct negotiation, resumed just a fortnight ago after almost two years in suspension, is still frail. But the meeting at Sharm, an Egyptian resort on the Red Sea, clearly has strengthened it. Granted, it would have been almost inconceivable for Messrs Netanyahu and Abbas to drag Mrs Clinton to Egypt, only to send her and Mr Mitchell shamefacedly home with the negotiation suspended once again. Nevertheless, a chorus of pessimists and sceptics were predicting just that.

In fact, however hesitantly and inarticulately, the two protagonists and their American umpire seem to be reaching for the decade-old, unconsummated "Clinton Parameters" as the way to solve the impasse over settlements, and, perhaps, as the formula for a wider agreement.

Bill Clinton, in the dying days of his presidency, proposed that Israel annex the large "settlement blocks" that it has built close to the pre-1967 border with the West Bank. It would compensate the new state of Palestine with unsettled land elsewhere. Mr Clinton offered the same paradigm for Jerusalem: the post-1967 Israeli-built suburbs would be annexed to West Jerusalem, Israel's capital; the Arab districts would form the capital of Palestine, with the holy sites placed under a special international regime. The Israeli leader at the time, Ehud Barak (now Mr Netanyahu's powerful defence minister) accepted; but Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian leader, could not bring himself to do so.

The Clinton Parameters may now be harnessed to serve as the basis of a solution to the uncomfortable fact that threatens to undermine the talks: that Mr Netanyahu's ten-month moratorium on settlement building runs out before the end of the month. The Israeli leader would quietly restrict further building to the "blocks", and the Palestinian leader would quietly swallow that, in anticipation of an eventual peace treaty that leaves the blocks under Israel. It

is not as easy as it sounds: the size of the blocks would immediately loom as the next source of trouble.

But if indeed Barack Obama is effectively resuscitating the Clinton Parameters, many in the Israeli peace camp would see that as a wise and welcome correction of his administration's original position: demanding a total freeze on settlements from Israel, including the blocks and including the Jewish suburbs built in East Jerusalem. That demand, naturally endorsed and embraced by the Palestinian Authority, backfired, as Mr Clinton might have predicted to Hillary had he been asked. By not distinguishing between the blocks and the other outlying settlements, thrust deep into the Palestinians' territory, and by not distinguishing between the Jewish and Arab districts of Jerusalem, the American demand united the broad mainstream of Israeli opinion behind Mr Netanyahu and his rightist-religious government. It played into the hands of the hardline settlers who spurn any freeze, anywhere, and still dream of thwarting the creation of an independent Palestinian state.

The sceptics and pessimists say the renewed talks are doomed because America, weaker now than ten years ago, hasn't come up with new ideas. In fact, the old ideas conceived under Mr Clinton are entirely adequate. What has been lacking in Washington has been the political will to thrust them down the throats of the two parties, and in Jerusalem and Ramallah the political (and personal) courage to swallow them.

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