

Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy in the Middle East

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The book is not an autobiography, but it does represent the culmination of a long journey that started in Jerusalem during the Yom Kippur war of 1973. I was actually there during the war and I did work on the kibbutz during the war and I stayed awake at night listening to the drone of American Hercules transport aircraft bringing in much needed military supplies for the Israeli army to turn the tide of battle against the Egyptians. Then listening on my radio to the BBC – they didn't have CNN in those days – and the BBC reporting the efforts of Henry Kissinger who was then the Secretary of State to affect a ceasefire. I became convinced that I should devote my life to understanding the American role in achieving peace in the Middle East.

I went back to Australia; I wrote my Ph.D. on the subject and through various serendipitous events came to Washington in 1982 in the midst of another war, Israel's war with Lebanon during the Reagan administration, and began to work in Washington on the U.S. role in peacemaking in the Middle East. Ten years later, I ended up as the advisor to President Clinton in the White House – twenty years since that epiphany that I had in Israel on that Yom Kippur night in 1973. There I was at the side of President Clinton, at the very moment when all of Israel's neighbors were sitting at the negotiating table, including the Palestinians.

When Yitzhak Rabin had been elected with a mandate to make peace I said to President Clinton, "The stars are so aligned that if you put your mind to it you could in your first term in office achieve four peace treaties between Palestinians, Jordanians, Syrians and the Lebanese and you could end the Arab-Israeli conflict." He looked at me and he said, "I want to do that." As simple as that and we embarked on an effort that consumed his attention for most of his eight years as president, particularly at the end of his presidency, as he sought to achieve a comprehensive peace and an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The first two years we thought we were making great progress with the Oslo Accords. There was the Israel-Jordan peace treaty, and then President Clinton sent me to Israel to work with Yitzhak Rabin on the negotiations that were then being conducted secretly to conclude the Syrian deal. The big secret was that Yitzhak Rabin had told us we could tell President Assad of Syria that if his needs were met he would affect a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights, which was the critical concession the Syrian President was demanding in order to make peace.

So I went out to Israel thinking that we were actually going to do it, because peace with Lebanon would follow very quickly after the peace with Syria. Five months later, Yitzhak Rabin was

assassinated and the whole process crated. I came back to Washington to work with Madeleine Albright as assistant secretary of the whole Middle East, to deal with Saddam Hussein and the revolutionary mullahs in Iran and Bibi Netanyahu in Israel. The whole process became incredibly difficult; whereas the wind had been at our backs in the first two years, now into the fifth and sixth years of Clinton's presidency the wind was in our face.

Then suddenly, Netanyahu's government collapsed. Ehud Barak was elected prime minister with a new mandate to make peace, and he came to Washington and he said to Clinton, "Let's finish it. In your last year in office and my first year in office, let's complete the job Yitzhak Rabin started and, by the way, I want you to send Indyk to Israel to work with me on that."

So, I went back to Israel at the beginning of 2000 – Clinton's last year in office – thinking that here was a second chance and you don't often get a second chance in life; that here we would finally finish the job that Rabin had started. Five months later it all crated again.

First of all, we missed the deal between Hafez al Asad and Ehud Barak. It was a tragedy – ships passing in the night. Asad coming to the end of his life was ready to make a deal at a moment when Barak was not; three months later when Barak was ready, it was too late – Asad had only three months to live and he decided to devote his energy to putting his son into power in Damascus rather than to making peace with Israel.

That changed the whole dynamic, because when we returned then to Yasser Arafat to try to make the Palestinian deal he was in the catbird seat. Barak and Clinton were running after him and when he finally got the deal that we thought he really wanted at the end of the Clinton administration the deal which would have involved 94-97% of the West Bank with territorial compensation for the rest. All of Gaza [with] a corridor connecting them, all of the Arab suburbs of east Jerusalem on the Palestinian sovereignty and Palestinian sovereignty on the Haram al-Sharif at the top of the Temple Mount where the al-Aqsa Mosque is – and a fair resolution of the refugee problem with Palestinians having a right to return to Palestine but not to return to Israel. Ehud Barak accepted that, Yasser Arafat said no. He preferred to listen to those of his aides who whispered in his ear, "Wait for George Bush. He'll get you a better deal."

Shimon Peres said to me at the time that history is like a horse that gallops past your window and the true act of statesmanship is to decide to jump through the window onto the horse, or let it pass you by. Arafat let it pass him by. Now, it's not so simple to jump on a galloping horse but Arafat, when given a choice of standing before his people and telling them, "I got you the independence that you want. I got you Jerusalem, but you're going to have to give up the right of return to Israel." He did not have the courage to do that and Palestinians and Israelis have been left in misery ever since.

I stayed on for six months to help President Bush through the handover to a new ambassador and during that time I came back with the newly elected Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to Washington for his first meeting with President Bush in March 2001. After the meeting in the Oval Office the president asked me to stay behind – I hadn't met him before but he knew that I had been involved with Clinton and he said to me, "What happened?" I said, "Well, Mr. President there's a lot of blame to go around but essentially it was a lack of leadership."

He stopped me – I had a few other things to say, but he stopped me and said, "That's right. No leadership. Barak and Clinton were two desperate men chasing after Yasser Arafat; they made

him a very good deal and he rejected it and resorted to violence. Now Sharon is not going to offer what Barak offered and Arafat has already rejected, so there's no Nobel Prize to be had here."

And he gave me that kind of smug smile of his that we've become familiar with, and that was it. When you think about it he got it right, basically he got it right. The problem was that the prescription that he drew for himself was that there was no point in trying and he walked away from the whole effort and left the Israelis and Palestinians to have at it – and they did. For five years they fought each other – horrendous suicide bombings and terrorism and Israeli retaliation – 3,000 Israelis and Palestinians died while Bush stood on the sidelines and the whole edifice of peacemaking that Bill Clinton had tried to construct was consumed in the flames of the intifada.

For me it was a very personal failure and it took me some time to come to terms with it. I have tried in this book to draw the lessons of that failed effort so that the next time a president tries again to make peace in the Middle East, he can perhaps draw on the lessons of that earlier exercise. I didn't know when I wrote the book that Barack Obama would be elected as president and that he would declare on day two that it was his intention to end the Arab-Israeli conflict and appoint George Mitchell as his envoy to begin to lay the groundwork for what he defined as a sustained diplomatic engagement to try to achieve peace between Israelis and Palestinians and between Israelis and Arabs.

So what does he need to know about what went wrong and what he should do? Well, in many ways he seems instinctively to know what to do. The first thing is to understand that it's better to try and fail than not to try at all. Bush's lesson was that it's better not to try than to try and fail. Barack Obama is following Clinton's lead in that regard, and I think he's right to do so.

The second thing he seems to understand is that you have to start early. You see, Osama bin Laden is quoted as saying – although I don't know whether he actually said it – that "You Americans have the watches, but we in the Middle East have the time." That's a basic truth. The president has four years – at best eight years – and that's it to achieve such an ambitious task as ending the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The leaders in that part of the world, except for Israel, have all the time in the world. They have no term limits except the limits of their natural lives. The Israeli prime ministers are different – their time is usually much shorter even than American presidents' terms because the iron wall of coalition collapse in Israel means that prime ministers last maybe two, maybe three years. I was in Israel twice for a total of four years and I dealt with five prime ministers.

So they tend to be in more of a hurry than our presidents who are also in a hurry. But what they're dealing with on the other side is people who are not in a hurry; people who are committed to maintaining the status quo because that's the best way to survive. Therefore, it's very important not just to start early to maximize the time available but to do a number of other things that can begin to change that equation and create a sense of urgency that matches the American-Israeli sense of urgency.

How to do that? Well, it's important for Barack Obama to understand that the best way to do it is to use America's power and influence to shape the strategic contexts. Now, he has a much harder job than Bill Clinton had because America's hard power is now tied down in Iraq and Afghanistan – our military forces – and America's soft power, its brand name, has been tarnished. Our influence in the region is not as great as it was at the time when Bill Clinton came to power.

The Soviet Union had collapsed. Saddam Hussein had just been defeated and America was dominate in the region.

That is no longer the case today. Instead, America faces a challenge from Iran, which has been advantaged by the mistakes that we made in Iraq which opened the gateway to Iran and enabled it, through its alliance with Syria, to spread its influence right up to the borders with Israel; with Hezbollah as its proxy to Lebanon; with Hamas as its proxy in Gaza. This presents a challenge to the new president but it also presents a challenge to the Arab leaders, because for them the idea that Iran would be dominate in their neighborhood – would interfere in their backyard on the most sensitive issues of Palestine and Lebanon – is unacceptable to them.

Persia, Shia, Iran trying to dominate the Sunni-Arab world is simply unacceptable and, therefore, they have to find a way to counter it. I don't know whether you noticed at the beginning of this Gaza process – or at the beginning of the last Israeli war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, that these Arab leaders – Saudi, Egyptian and Jordanian – all criticized Hezbollah in 2006 and Hamas this last December, because they see this as an effort by Iran to spread its influence and to undermine them.

You see, there's a great battle of ideas going on in this part of the world – not the one that George Bush was talking about, but a different one. It's a battle in which Hezbollah, Hamas, Ahmadinejad in Iran are saying to the Arab street and to the Muslim world beyond, "Our way works. Violence, terrorism, defiance of the United States and the international community, threatening Israel's existence is the way to redeem the dignity, honor and justice for the Palestinians as well as for the Arab people."

And these Arab leaders have to be able to counter that idea with the argument that their way works. Their way is to support an American-led effort to resolve the conflict through diplomacy and peacemaking so that they can show that moderation, not violence, can achieve more for the Palestinians. That violence will only bring them the devastation that we are now witnessing in Gaza, but that moderation can bring them peace and normalcy and security for themselves and for their children.

So, in terms of the challenge of President Obama now is to shape a strategic context in which he balances – he tips the balance in favor of moderation – in which he supports those who would make peace and he opposes those who would not. [A strategic advantage] in which he tries to take advantage of this sense of common thread that Israel and the Arab leaders share. They all feel threatened by Iran, especially as Iran tries to acquire nuclear weapons, and the common interest they have in trying to resolve their conflicts so that they have the cement of a virtual alliance against Iran.

In that sense, shaping the strategic context can best be achieved by heading off Iran's nuclear program, by drawing down our forces in Iraq so that our forces are freed up for other purposes, which will start to concentrate the minds of the Iranians, and by advancing peace not just on the Palestinian track but on the Syrian track as well.

Why the Syrian track? Because as I've said to you, Syria is allied with Iran. Syria is the conduit of Iran's influence into the Arab-Israeli arena. You take Syria out of that alliance by promoting peace between Israel and Syria and you immediately cut that conduit and put Iran in a position where it has to decide: does it want to continue on its path and therefore isolate itself? Or does it want to be part of the effort to establish a new peaceful order in the region? That's the third

element in this game which Barack Obama, I believe, intends to do, which is to hold out his hand to the Iranians and say, “If you want to be part of this process, you are welcome, but if you don’t then understand that we are not going to wait for you. You will isolate yourself.”

The last point is that when the United States engages with the Middle East, it inevitably will produce a result that it does not intend. That is because we cannot know, as a distant power, the cross-currents, the undercurrents, the calculations of authoritarian leaders who don’t share their calculations with their own people and certainly not with us. But efforts tried; the effort to establish a strategic context for peacemaking will affect all of their calculations.

At a certain point one or other of them will decide that they’re going to act and that’s the last point. We have to tune our radars to those moments when leaders break the mold of expected behavior, because that’s when there’s a chance to achieve a breakthrough. When Anwar Sadat stood up and said he was ready to go to the ends of the earth, even to Jerusalem, to make peace *that* was breaking the mold of expected behavior.

When King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia stood up – well he actually sat down and gave an interview to Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* – and said, “I’m ready to lead the Arab states to peace with Israel, and there will be an end to the conflict and normalization of relations, and an Israeli flag will fly on the Israeli embassies in every capital of the Arab world,” *that* was breaking the mold of expected behavior.

When Yitzhak Rabin goes off and deals with Arafat, the same thing. So when those moments arrive, the President has to be ready to grab the extended hand and help lead those leaders to the Promised Land of peace. I really believe that it can be done. It will not be easy. It will take a sustained effort, but Barack Obama has a unique ability to lead these people to peace because of his own personal narrative; because of his middle name; because of his amazing ability to communicate. He has an opportunity here, I believe, with sustained and wise leadership to actually finish the job that we were unable to finish in Bill Clinton’s term in office.

Thank you very much.

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