

Wrestling on Shaky Ground: Israel, Palestine, and the Decline of a Superpower

January 23, 2012

SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2011, Israeli politicians, generals, and diplomats displayed a growing nervousness in anticipation of "September," i.e., the proclaimed Palestinian intention to seek a full United Nations Membership for the State of Palestine.

Netanyahu called in every debt in the American political arena to make sure that the United States would veto the Palestinian bid, and went on to a massive international lobbying campaign to mobilize as many UN member states as possible to cast a "no" vote in the General Assembly where the U.S. has no veto power. The diplomatic campaign was focused especially on European and other Western democracies, but not even the smallest and most godforsaken of Third World countries was neglected, if there seemed any chance to influence, convince, pressure, or buy off its government.

At the same time, there was much talk of massive riots taking place on the ground, amounting to a Third Intifada, and Nethayhu's hardliner Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman ominously predicted "a vast bloodbath." Military commanders on the West Bank mobilized forces and made detailed plans for confronting the predicted upsurge of the Palestinian masses.

A new crowd-control device of original Israeli manufacture was unveiled — "The Flying Stinker," capable of being sprayed from a helicopter and instantly dousing a crowd of thousands with an extremely stinking and extremely hard to remove liquid.

For their part, Israeli police commissioners spoke with alarm of possible mass sympathy demonstration by Arab citizens of Israel, and asked the Ministry of Justice to draw up Emergency Regulations authorizing the mass internment of thousands.

The army provided West Bank settlers with additional arms and training towards the eventuality of thousands of Palestinians attempting to storm their perimeter fences. Each and every settlement was mapped out and a "red line" defined, whose crossing by a Palestinian crowd — even an unarmed crowd — would be considered as "a life danger" and justify the use of live ammunition.

Some radical settler groups, not content with these preparations, embarked on "preemptive strikes" in the form of torching mosques and desecrating Muslim (and Christian) cemeteries. For its part, the French section of the Kahanist "Jewish Defense League" — with a long record of violent acts in Paris and other French cities — announced a "mobilization of Jews with European military experience" to "fly in and help out our brothers in Judea and Samaria."

As of the time of writing (mid-October), nothing happened even remotely resembling these dire predictions and doom scenarios. Palestinian Authority officials announced in advance that they would organize mass rallies in Ramallah and other Palestinian cities to support the statehood bid, with President Abbas' address to the United Nations General Assembly, broadcast directly from New York, shown on giant screens. But at the same time, they also reiterated that there was no intention of having the masses march towards any Israeli military checkpoint or settlement. Indeed, Palestinian security forces were instructed to themselves block any such confrontational march (even this was not needed).

And such is more or less what actually happened. Tens of thousands did stream into Ramallah's

main square and raised loud cheers when Abbas spoke on such issues as decades of oppression, the experience of becoming and of being a refugee, life under occupation, military checkpoints, settlements and land confiscations, the firm demand for independence in the here and now, and the willingness to make peace in the 1967 borders — and nothing less than the 1967 borders. Never a charismatic leader, Mahmud Abbas gained considerable popularity from standing up to the Americans and rejecting the enormous pressure from Washington to shelve his statehood bid.

But afterwards — as Abbas got a stirring and prolonged standing ovation from the UN delegates and departed the podium, and the statehood bid went into a prolonged exhausting sojourn in the Security Council bureaucracy — the crowds in Ramallah dispersed quietly and there was no strong tendency to march en masse and tangle with the Israeli soldiers and settlers. Since no Palestinian seriously expected the UN bid to make an immediate change in his or her actual life, no one was so disappointed as to burst out in anger.

Some clashes with the army did happen on that day, mostly at accustomed "hot spots" throughout the West Bank. But they were not much bigger than those which ensue every Friday — when Israeli soldiers always disperse Palestinian villagers, accompanied by Israeli and international activists, who march to protest land confiscation and settler encroachments and the Separation Wall. At the village of Qusra, the 35-year-old Essam Kamal Badran had been shot to death, during a confrontation with roving settlers and the soldiers defending them — just two hours before Abbas mounted the podium in New York. There have been cases in history where the killing of a single person was enough to set off a great conflagration — but Essam Kamal Badran was not one of these.

And so, Israeli right-wing politicians and commentators basked in a flurry of self-congratulation: "Tsunami? What Tsunami? It was hardly a tropical storm!" Military commanders did warn that "September" is not necessarily a chronological designation and that the Palestinian mass upsurge might still break out in full force, exactly when no one expects it — but there was little public attention to such alarmists. Nor did Israeli public opinion show great interest in the fact that the Palestinian bid would still eventually get to a Security Council vote; that on being blocked there the Palestinians would go to the General Assembly where they could be sure of being recognized as a state (though not a full UN Member State); that then they could start war crimes proceedings against Israeli military officers at the International Criminal Court in the Hague; and that international law provides all kinds of other creative ways in which a recognized Palestinian statehood could be made into a big Israeli headache.

As far as the average Israeli is concerned, the threatening cloud of "September" had dissipated harmlessly, with credit for this achievement granted to Prime Minister Netanyahu. What swayed Israeli public opinion was not so much Netanyahu's own speech at the UN — a well-delivered piece of polemics, clearly not intended to convince anyone who was not convinced already — as the speech delivered a day earlier on the same podium by the President of the United States, described as "the most Zionist speech in Obama's career" as well as his "most cynical one" (in Hebrew, "Zionism" and "cynicism" sound very much alike—"*tzionut*" and "*tziniyut*" respectively).

Obama waxed emotional about Israeli children threatened by Arab aggression, while sparing not a single word for Palestinian suffering, ongoing occupation, settlement construction, 1967 borders, and other issues whose conspicuous mention in previous Obama speeches caused major confrontations with Netanyahu in the past three years. Obama had evidently been "tamed" and brought to heel, intimidated by his low showing in the polls and in particular by the loss to the Republicans of a traditionally Democrat New York City Congressional District with numerous Jewish voters.

Clearly, at least until the polls close in November 2012, Netanyahu has nothing to fear from the

White House — and the Palestinians and the cause of Middle East peace, absolutely nothing to hope from that direction. In token of which, Netanyahu brazenly embarked on several large-scale settlement construction projects in East Jerusalem, brushing aside the ineffective verbal protests from Washington.

However, Netanyahu's short-term victory was bought at a price — a price that in the long term might prove prohibitive. A highly visible demonstration and exhibition was given, in the glare of worldwide publicity, of a massive involvement and interference in U.S. internal politics, to the extent of being able to bend Congress and President alike to directives issuing from the Prime Minister's office in Jerusalem. As never before, the United States was exposed as a biased and dishonest broker, completely unfit for the role of sole mediator between Israelis and Arabs which it had arrogated to itself over several decades.

In thus forcing Israel's main international ally into a highly exposed and humiliating position, Netanyahu considerably helped to erode the United States' position as the dominant global power — a position whose preservation is clearly in Israel's most vital and existential interest.

Contrary to hasty predictions, Israel did not face a "tsunami" in September. But another metaphor might not be out of place. As a result of the Palestinian appeal to the UN — and even more, as a result of the blatant action taken by Netanyahu to counter that bid — a widening fissure was opened in the rock on which American policy in the Middle East had been painstakingly built.

The House that Kissinger Built

IN THE WAKE OF THE YOM KIPPUR WAR, a conference was convened in Geneva on December 21, 1973, with the proclaimed aim of achieving peace in the Middle East — co-chaired by the United States and the Soviet Union.

At the time, the choice of this format seemed self-evident. The Americans had been arming Israel while it was the Soviets who supplied Egypt and Syria — making Israeli-Arab wars into wars by proxy between the global blocks, one of the places where the Cold War was again and again turning hot. The natural corollary was that a peaceful resolution must involve both superpower sponsors of the regional contending powers.

But though few realized it at the time, it was the end of an era. After the ceremonial opening, the Geneva Conference was never convened again — though for years thereafter the Soviets stridently demanded it, and both Israeli and Arab Communists took care to include the slogan "Reconvene the Geneva Conference!" in every statement and on the banners of every demonstration. In vain, for Henry Kissinger, who dominated U.S. foreign policy, managed to cut the Soviets completely out, and establish the United States as the sole mediator between Israel and its Arab neighbors — a role which would go unchallenged for decades.

The principles of this American policy were laid down during Kissinger's trademark "Shuttle Diplomacy," when he dazzled the world media with his flights back and forth between Israel and the Arab capitals — and would profoundly affect the policies of many later administrations in Washington, though with much variation of detail under various Presidents and Secretaries of State.

Arab leaders were made to understand that the United States was the only power capable of inducing Israel to withdraw from the territories occupied in 1967 (or at least, from portions of these territories); and that the United States was willing to exert this influence on behalf of Arabs — but for a price, namely a shift of their allegiance in global politics. Those amenable to such proposals stood not only to regain territory lost in 1967 but also to get economic bounties in Washington's gift.

The Kissinger doctrine came down to dividing the process into as many steps as possible. First, to separate the various Arab parties to the conflict and deal separately with each. Then, to cut each specific occupied territory due to be returned to each of these Arab parties into as many slices as possible — with the return of each slice requiring a new "Interim Agreement" of its own, to be once again negotiated by the American mediator who would exact a broker's fee all over again.

Israeli right-wingers railed against the Americans "paying the Arabs in Israeli coin," and on one notorious occasion settler youths greeted Kissinger in Jerusalem with the anti-Semitic epithet "Jewboy." But successive Israeli governments increasingly discovered the advantages for themselves in this kind of U.S. policy. For each new partial withdrawal, the Americans had to court and wheedle — as well as pressure — the Israeli government of the day, and provide all kinds of gifts and inducements: increased financial aid; the most sophisticated of American weaponry; a reaffirmation of the tacit U.S. acquiescence in Israel's possession of nuclear arms (and in the strong Israeli intolerance of anyone else in the Middle East attempting to gain the same).

Moreover, dividing the process of withdrawal from the Occupied Territories into very many intermediate stages held out to Israeli hawks the hope that Israel could avoid the later stages and keep permanently at least part of its 1967 conquests. Indeed, it has become common for successive governments of Israel to follow a withdrawal from some part of the Occupied Territories with a redoubled campaign of creating settlement facts in the territories still retained under its control.

Of all Arab countries, Egypt was the showcase success of American Middle East peace making. The most populous country and generally acknowledged leader of the Arab world, Egypt shifted from being the Soviet Union's main ally in the Middle East to being an equally firm and crucial ally for the Americans. In return, Egypt got back in four stages (1974, 1975, 1979 and 1982) all of the Egyptian territory captured by Israel.

In addition, a hefty annual U.S. aid to Egypt was fixed at two thirds of the sum given to Israel, amounting to about two billion dollars per year. Having no significant lobby of its own on Capitol Hill, Egypt could never have hoped for anything of the kind under any other circumstances. However, providing such aid also gave the United States an enormous leverage and power over Egypt's policies — a price which Egyptians would more and more come to consider onerous.

The Egyptian-Israeli process did involve one very notable moment when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat attempted to avoid the American tutelage and proceed on his own, with the dramatic gesture of coming to Israel and speaking at the Knesset — an entirely independent initiative which took the Americans (and everybody else) completely by surprise.

Sadat's addressing the Israeli public directly did produce some concrete results, such as the birth of the Peace Now movement, which during the 1980s and 1990s was capable of bringing tens or even hundreds of thousands into the streets of Tel-Aviv. But it was not enough to bring about an Israeli-Egyptian peace deal, especially considering the Begin Government's last-moment effort to establish new settlement facts in Sinai.

Direct American involvement and pressure proved indispensable. President Carter had to summon Begin and Sadat for an intensive week in Camp David — and half a year later to come in person to the Middle East and engage in a presidential shuttle tour, in order to hammer out some pesky "final details" — before the peace deal and Israeli withdrawal from all of Sinai were finally agreed.

Moreover, Sadat's aspiration — to achieve a deal for the Palestinians as well as for his own country — came to naught. It was diverted by Begin into a years-long and completely futile round of

negotiations, in which the Americans showed no special interest or effort and which was given the coup de grace by Israel's bloody invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The same tactic would be used, again and again, by Begin's successors.

Back in 1974, Kissinger aspired to make with Syria the same kind of deal as with Egypt. In the immediate aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, he arranged for the Syrians an appetizer — the return of the city of Quneitra, which had been the capital of the Syrian Golan until 1967 and which was depopulated and largely destroyed under Israeli rule. On numerous occasions during the following three decades, the possibility of Syria making an agreement similar to that made by Egypt was raised — but never followed through to a successful conclusion.

President Hafez al Assad and his son and heir Bashar were willing enough to flirt with the Americans, and on various occasions entered into rounds of U.S.-sponsored negotiations with Israel — but they were never quite ready to sever all ties with the Soviet Union (or, after its demise, with Iran) and become unequivocal followers of the United States. And for their part, Israeli settlers on the Golan — far less controversial among the general Israeli public than those on the West Bank — were able to mount a formidable public campaign and threaten to exact a heavy political price from any Prime Minister contemplating withdrawal from the Golan (Rabin in 1994, Barak in 2000).

Thus, American diplomacy marked no success on this front: Israel remained on the Golan up to the present (and has paid for it with two bloody wars in Lebanon which were to a considerable degree wars by proxy with Syria). With the outbreak of the popular uprising in Syria in early 2011, Israelis noted (doves with regret, hawks in satisfaction) that any idea of a deal with Syria must wait until that country's internal crisis is resolved, one way or another.

AT SOME TIMES DURING THE 1970s, the idea was floated of an "Interim Agreement" between Israel and Jordan in which Israel would hand over to Jordanian rule some portions of the West Bank — but it was never pursued with any energy, being opposed by hard-liners in the Israeli cabinet and viewed with suspicion by Palestinians who did not like the idea of restored Jordanian rule. Moreover, it was made clear to King Hussein of Jordan that while some parts of the West Bank might be handed back, Israeli rule in "United Jerusalem" was non-negotiable. The king is known to have remarked at the time that he was being punished for not having attacked Israel in 1973, and for having always been pro-Western.

In 1988, under the impact of the First Intifada, Jordan relinquished to the Palestinians its claim over the West Bank, and the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty of 1994 involved virtually no territorial issues. It was the Palestinian issue which emerged as the main field for American Middle Eastern peace making and for incremental territorial agreements a la Kissinger — which, after what seemed a promising start, got hopelessly muddled.

Palestinians had never been very fond of the United States — for which the U.S. had given them many good reasons. Still, in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union and of the Gulf War, they saw few diplomatic options other than trying to squeeze into whatever openings the Americans left them — first as "The Palestinian part of the Jordanian-Palestinian Delegation" at the 1991 Madrid Conference, and after the 1993 Oslo Agreements as an openly declared delegation of the PLO. The sudden transformation of Yasser Arafat, from a "notorious terrorist" who was denied even a visa to enter the United States into a honored and frequent visitor to the White House, seemed to herald a major turn in Palestinian-American relations as well as Israeli-Palestinian ones — which was not entirely the case.

It is noteworthy that, as with Sadat's Knesset speech in 1977, Israel-Palestinian negotiations had known a short interval of an effort to bypass American mediation and tutelage. Norway, a small

country with no significant means of pressuring or rewarding either side, took up the role of mediator and facilitator. For some months, the "Beilin Boys" — well-meaning Israeli intellectuals with rather fuzzy credentials from the Rabin Government — met with well-meaning Palestinian intellectuals, who had a more definite mandate from Arafat, under the auspices of well-meaning Norwegian diplomatic intellectuals. In the seclusion of the countryside outside the Norwegian capital, they talked and listened to each other and tried to find creative solutions, in a manner which would nowadays be entirely inconceivable.

The Israelis who were there did not, however, have any authority to conclude a full-fledged peace agreement, involving a complete Israeli withdrawal or the creation of an independent Palestinian state. They could go no further than an interim agreement, giving Palestinians a limited amount of autonomy and leaving the most crucial issues as blanks to be filled in later.

Had the filling in of the blanks been left to people as well meaning as those who originally drafted the documents, the results might have been different. But once the agreement drafted in Oslo was officially signed in Washington, the task of filling in these blanks came to involve Israeli generals, security operatives, and settlers, as well as various armed Palestinian militias — and the fairly impartial Norwegian mediators were replaced by Americans all too susceptible to considerations of American power interests abroad and vulnerable to pressures issuing from America's own political system.

The "Interim" division of the West Bank in 1994 into "A" areas under complete (more or less) control of the Palestinian Authority, "B" under its partial control, and "C" (most of the West Bank) under remaining Israeli rule had a distinct Kissingeresque flavor. It might have been a rough equivalent of the 1975 Interim Agreement whereby Israel handed back to Egypt a slice of Western Sinai while still retaining the bulk of the peninsula's territory.

In retrospect, however, such a comparison would clearly be false: no more than three years after that Interim Agreement, Israel signed a definite peace agreement with Egypt, including a binding obligation to relinquish the whole of Sinai and evacuate all settlements there — and eventually carried it out to the letter. Which, needless to say, was not the case with the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement of 1994.

Would things have been significantly different by now, had Yitzchak Rabin not been assassinated, had he been re-elected in 1996 and made a sincere effort to complete what he started and meet the deadline ("A Definite Agreement no later than May 1999")? It is very difficult to answer, especially since Rabin has become so much the stuff of myth, the Hero and Martyr of the Israeli Left, that it is sometimes difficult to recall the all too imperfect living Rabin.

All we can say is that in history as it happened — with Rabin assassinated, and Netanyahu elected in his place, and Barak posing as Rabin's heir and proving to be nothing of the kind, and being replaced by Sharon, and so on — the target date set out in the Oslo Agreement had come and gone with no Definite Agreement and no State of Palestine. So did the timetable later set out in "The Road Map for Peace" (A Palestinian state in 2005).

The division of the West Bank turned from "Interim" to semi-permanent — a situation completely intolerable to Palestinians, leaving them with a collection of isolated enclaves completely surrounded by Israeli-ruled territory. All the more intolerable as this status quo includes constant settlement extension and land-grab, as well as raids each night by Israeli soldiers and security operatives, detaining at their convenience any Palestinian deemed (by Israel) to be "a terrorist" even at the heart of the areas supposedly "under full Palestinian control."

Among all the factors and considerations involved in this situation, a salient one stands out and yet is hardly ever mentioned: the United States did not keep its part in the kind of deal set out by Kissinger and his successors. The Palestinian leadership did considerably change its international allegiance; the United States failed to pressure Israel into giving up the bulk of the West Bank territory. Which could be attributed to some presidents plainly not wanting to do it, and others possibly wanting but coming up against the constraints of domestic U.S. politics.

The Camp David fiasco of August 2000 is a case in point. While much of what happened there is the subject of ongoing debate and controversy, there is no question about the fact that Arafat was reluctant to go to Camp David; that he agreed only after being explicitly promised that in case of failure the United States would not assign blame to anyone; and that in spite of this promise, when the summit did fail, President Clinton appeared on prime-time Israeli TV and placed the blame squarely on Arafat, who had "rejected Barak's generous offers."

It is also an undoubted fact that Bill Clinton is married to Hilary Clinton and — whatever problems might occur in their married life — that he is involved in and committed to the success of her political career; that the Camp David summit took place just a few months before the elections in which Hilary Clinton was seeking a Senate seat in the state of New York; that New York is, of all U.S. states, the one where the Jewish vote counts most in elections; and that the government of Israel has well-trying methods and mechanisms for manipulating the Jewish vote in U.S. elections.

A direct link between the above two sets of facts is admittedly a matter of conjecture — but a reasonable one.

The Camp David failure was followed by the outbreak of the Second Intifada, and the replacement of Ehud Barak by Ariel Sharon in Israel — and of Bill Clinton by George W. Bush in the U.S.. It was soon clear that Palestinians (or for that matter, peace-minded Israelis) had little to expect of the Bush Administration. Arafat was swiftly re-demonized, once again a "notorious terrorist" who was decidedly not welcome in Washington — and though Bush did utter the words "A Palestinian State" he failed to take any step to make them a reality.

True, Arafat was offered one real chance to get into the Bush Administration's good books: In March 2002, Vice President Cheney was touring the Middle East, in a (not very successful) effort to drum up support for the impending war on Iraq — and he invited Arafat to meet him in Cairo. Had Arafat provided what Cheney wanted — i.e. the blessing and moral support of the Palestinian People's leader for the American assault on Saddam Hussein — the Bush Administration might or might not have reciprocated suitably, one more of history's unanswerable might-have-beens.

A few weeks after Arafat turned down Cheney's generous offer, the full might of the Israeli armed forces was launched against the Palestinian Authority (Bush did say — repeatedly — that the Israeli troops should turn back, and even added "And I do mean it!," but Sharon did not seem particularly impressed). Arafat spent the years remaining to him under close Israeli siege of his Ramallah headquarters, except for the last weeks of dying at the Paris hospital from whatever it was which caused his death.

Arafat was replaced by Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) whom the Americans had already been grooming for years for the role of "Good Guy," as against "Bad Guys" ranging from Arafat to Hamas. Abbas unequivocally opposed the use of violence in the Palestinians' struggle to gain independence, instructed his security forces to actively pursue and imprison members of Hamas and prevent armed attacks on Israelis, and he entrusted the restructuring and training of these security forces to Lieutenant General Keith W. Dayton of the United States Army. The Palestinian economy was given into the charge of Salam Fayyad, Finance Minister and later Prime Minister, whose previous career

included graduation from the University of Texas and a stint at the International Monetary Fund.

If the United States were to reward any Palestinian leadership for staunch adherence to the West, Abbas and Fayyad should have been the obvious candidates. Yet they actually achieved very little. No more than Bush's trumpeted Annapolis Conference, which observers predicted would be a meaningless photo opportunity (and were proven completely right). And also an exhausting and futile round of negotiations with PM Ehud Olmert and his Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, whose proclaimed aim was to produce a "Shelf Agreement," which would be duly signed and whose implementation would take place once the Palestinian Authority is deemed (by Israel) ready to take up the task. Washington contented itself with asking for occasional progress report on these talks, until they were definitely cut off by the heavy Israeli bombing of Gaza.

Palestinians (like a great many other people) eagerly awaited the U.S. Presidential elections of 2008, in the hope of a new President substantially changing the Bush policies. The election of Obama seemed at first to fulfill these hopes, especially in the wake of Obama's Cairo speech, where the issue of Israeli settlement activity on the West Bank — and the demand for its cessation or "freeze" — was put to the front.

To begin with, Obama may have sincerely considered the settlement issue as a preliminary, which should be quickly dealt with, clearing the way to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on substantive issues. In fact, it became a wrestling bout continuing, on and off, for the whole of Obama's first two years. Its main lasting outcome was to demonstrate that — despite the enormous disparity in size between Israel and the United States — the Prime Minister of Israel wields enough influence in American politics to contend on equal terms with the President of the United States.

At one moment Netanyahu did reluctantly agree to a ten-month settlement freeze, but took care to exclude settlement in East Jerusalem — which made the freeze insufficient in Palestinian eyes. The approach of the 2010 mid-term elections forced Obama to place the entire issue on the back burner, pressured by Congressional Democrats apprehensive for their seats. For his part Netanyahu, timing the freeze to end just ahead of the American elections, refused outrightly to renew it. Obama then proved unable to bring significant pressure or offer significant inducements, which would make Netanyahu change his mind.

In May of this year — with the Arab Spring already convulsing the Middle East, and with a tough Presidential re-election campaign just ahead — Obama made a last serious Middle East effort: to side-step the settlement issue and approach the substantive issues, defining a framework around which negotiations could proceed to a concrete conclusion. Specifically, that the borders between Israel and Palestine be based on the 1967 lines, with possible mutual exchanges of territory to be worked out between the two parties.

Had Netanyahu agreed to base negotiations on this principle, the Palestinians might have been seriously tempted to come to the table — even without a completely satisfactory settlement freeze. But Netanyahu had no such intention. On the contrary, he launched an all-out attack on the President, in the White House itself, condemning the 1967 borders as "a danger to Israel's security" and reiterating instead his support for "a Palestinian State" in the abstract, carefully avoiding any reference to exactly where such a state might be located. Two days later, he convincingly demonstrated that the United States Congress — Senate and House, Democrats and Republicans alike — was ready to back him up, with a most enthusiastic multitude of standing ovations.

Half a year later, with Obama already in the thick of a hard-fought elections campaign and his standing in the polls none too good, the President's above-mentioned UN speech placed a sad epitaph on these wasted years. No mention of settlements, of the 1967 borders, of Palestinian

suffering or of anything which might in any way anger Netanyahu and Netanyahu's backers in the U.S. electoral scene.

In effect, it was a speech of abdication by the decades-long Sole Middle East Mediator. Netanyahu was set free to grab Palestinian land and otherwise do his worst, and expect no more than ineffective verbal protests from Washington. Mahmoud Abbas, in sheer self-preservation, was pushed into an obdurate defiance of the Americans, going ahead with his UN move—though in his case there was a very concrete possibility of the United States retaliating with dire financial sanctions.

All in all, the foreign policy house erected by Kissinger and buttressed by Kissinger's successors lay in ruins. Its cornerstone — the assumption that it is the dog that wags the tail, and that the United States could at need call its Middle East ally to heel — had been knocked out.

Protégé of a Sinking Empire

THE ABOVE IS, OF COURSE, part of a much larger, continuing process — the United States losing ground in the international arena. A process proceeding from many causes unconnected to the Middle East, and in which economics clearly plays a major role. Still, Netanyahu's Israel is doing its fair share in hastening the process along — again and humiliating the United States and its President, blatantly interfering in American politics and demonstrating for all to see how well the tail can and does wag the dog. Pushing the United States to adopt and actively pursue questionable policies on an issue which is highly sensitive to a great many people in very many countries around the world — so as to lose the Americans friends and make them new enemies.

When examined dispassionately, all of this would seem little short of madness — as, of all countries in the world, Israel stands to lose the most from the fall of the United States. Having in effect tied its fortunes to a ship which seems to be foundering, Israel proceeds to impose a heavy burden dragging that mother ship down.

Nowadays, the possibility of the American Empire going the way of the British Empire is no longer the stuff of fantasy or wild fancy. Even if not completely inevitable, it has certainly become a real possibility which must be taken seriously, which might become a concrete reality during the lifetime of many living in the world today.

Should China, for example, become the new dominant global power, the arbiter of the fortunes of countries in the Middle East as in other regions of the world, Israel would stand very exposed and vulnerable indeed. There would be no Israeli lobby in Beijing, no Israeli leverage in internal Chinese politics. Cynical Chinese policy-makers might, if it suits an ephemeral interest, ally themselves with Israel — and then drop that alliance at the drop of a hat. In which case Israel might find that a peace based on the 1967 borders is no longer on offer.

Thus, an urgent new reason has emerged for Israel to make haste, end the occupation and make peace with the Palestinians — in addition to the host of well-known moral and practical reasons for so doing. Much better to let Israel get its definite, internationally recognized borders while the United States is still a dominant world power.

Israel's leverage in the American political system should be treated as a precious, non-renewable resource, which must not be irresponsibly frittered away in blocking and humiliating a President and holding Congress hostage and putting off the end of the occupation and "gaining time" when time works against Israel. Instead, this precious resource should be used — while still available — to help build up a solid and enduring structure of peace with the Palestinians and of legitimacy for Israel in

its Middle Eastern environment.

If it is not too late already.

Postscript (Nov. 3, 2011)

SINCE THE ABOVE WAS WRITTEN, quite a few more things have happened (as could always be expected in this country and region). In general, they tend to confirm the impression of the United States loosing and losing its grip on Middle East events.

- Taking everybody by surprise, Netanyahu announced a prisoner exchange deal whereby Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, held by Hamas for more than five years, was set free in exchange for the release of 1027 Palestinian prisoners from Israeli prisons. Shalit's family had conducted a highly successful campaign, gaining wide public sympathy for the plight of their son — but Netanyahu seemed dead set against the proposed deal, having long gone on record in opposition to any such "surrender to terrorism." Various explanations were offered for his volte-face — from seeking to weaken Abu Mazen's standing in the Palestinian public (in which Israel's PM ironically found a common interest with Hamas) to trying to distract attention from the Social Protest Movement which had burst into the streets of Israeli cities in recent months. Whatever his considerations, the move proved highly popular in the Israeli public, immediately pushing Netanyahu's ratings in the polls sharply up. The deal had been brokered by Egyptian and German mediators, with some Turkish involvement in the last part — and certainly no American involvement whatsoever. In fact, the Americans indicated their clear displeasure, both because they saw no reason to strengthen Hamas and because the deal was in a clear and rather embarrassing contradiction to their own policy: the United States would not release prisoners from Guantanamo (not even far fewer than a thousand) in order to get back an American soldier captured in Afghanistan.
- Once again the Gaza Strip's border with Israel flared up, with the shooting of Palestinian missiles answered with bombing runs by Israeli planes, and more missiles and more planes. It was once again the Egyptians, who have reasonably good relations with Israel as well as with Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, who worked feverishly to prevent a big conflagration and achieve a cease-fire. The Americans, who do not deal with those deemed to be terrorists, had no role to play.
- President Mahmud Abbas went ahead with plans to get Palestine accepted as a full-fledged Member State in UNESCO — a kind of dress rehearsal towards the similar vote in the UN Assembly General. He rebuffed considerable American pressures, threats of financial retaliations and various inducements and offers of a "compromise" falling short of the status of a full-fledged state. On the day after the UNESCO vote, where the Palestinian position was endorsed by a huge majority of the International Community, Netanyahu announced in retaliation the accelerated building of 2000 new settlement housing units — he, too, feeling that he could act with impunity.
- Just as this is being written, a high-profile public debate has burst out in the Israeli media and political system on the previously taboo question of a "preemptive strike" against the Iranian nuclear program. From some of the articles published, it seems Netanyahu and his Defense Minister Barak seriously consider launching an Israeli attack on Iran even without an American approval — though such an attack would have a deep impact on America.
- Should the UN ploy fail to get them concrete results, an increasing number of Palestinians support the option of declaring the Palestinian Authority disbanded — a stillborn effort to get independence which had become the mask and tool of continued occupation — and to symbolically "hand back the keys to Israel". Such an act, which might throw the West Bank into complete chaos, would carry considerable risks for the Palestinians themselves — but would have the potential of causing great headache to both Israel and the United States.

To quote a well-known Chinese proverb, we certainly live in interesting times.

Footnotes