Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, and the refusal to recognize a Palestinian state

Reiner Bernstein*

The die has been cast. In Washington, the American President and the German Chancellor formally withdrew any support to recognize the state of Palestine in September at the United Nations. Both leaders remain, they say, committed to direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. But until sustainable results will be achieved by those means the chances for Palestinian sovereignty are over. Angela Merkel's praise of the unique friendship with America was as demonstrative as Benyamin Netanyahu's eulogy two weeks ago at the same place.

The leadership in Ramallah reacted immediately with an internal dispute: 'Is there any political reason left to go to New York? Without the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany our appeal seems hopeless, even if a large majority in the General Assembly is determined to vote for us.' For Tony Blair who pleaded for an active involvement of the Middle East Quartet, international diplomacy has to stop at the gates of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: The government in Jerusalem, he explained in an interview, was too concerned by the prevailing instability and uncertainties in the Arab world.

Blair apparently did not take note of the proud announcement of Ehud Barak that his country is prepared to challenge existential threats within a range of 1,000 miles. Is the former British prime minister afraid of the Arab reform movements? Whoever took the chance to meet some of their protagonists in Egypt and Jordan had

---

* Munich, June 12-13, 2011. I would like to extend my thanks to my wife Judith und our friend Bernard Brown for checking through my English translation.

to learn that domestic politics have a much greater priority for them than endeavors to solve external affairs.

In May, the Foreign Office in Berlin was disdainful of the criticism by the Social-Democratic Party (SPD) in the Bundestag. In a written statement it pronounced that there is no urgency to take a decision vis-à-vis the proclamation of a Palestinian state. It was former Minister of Foreign Affairs and now chairman of the SPD faction Frank-Walter Steinmeier who criticized Mrs. Merkel because of her early “No” after the rhetorical and substantial encouragements the Federal Government had provided – and is still providing – for all the preparatory work Messrs. Mahmoud Abbas and Salam Fayyad have carried out with the aim of establishing a Palestinian state this year. However, for official Berlin this assistance is longer relevant. If this strange behavior should lead Palestinians and others to lose their faith in the German government’s reliability – judging from past experiences we will still be around afterwards to offer material compensation!

For those external players who pinned their hopes on the renewal of negotiations it seems to be advisable that their diplomats take a look into the cabinet files and dossiers. Afterwards their confidence is likely to weaken, since up to now – as a result of the political and the humanitarian asymmetry between Israel and the Palestinians – all what the Palestinians have experienced is misery and despair. The Federal Government has itself recognized this sorry state of affairs by admitting that the status quo is untenable: “The settlements are going to make a two-state solution impossible soon," the Foreign Office conceded. After Netanyahu’s recent performance in Washington nobody should have any illusions about the aspirations of his government.

Options and failures

Of course, the proclamation of a Palestinian state will not stop the occupation automatically. Of course, the Palestinians will still be confined in their movements in the foreseeable future. And of course, the Israeli policy will continue to expand its settlement project in the West Bank and “to thicken” its presence in East Jerusalem. It is interesting to note in this context that for Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin not even postal services from west to east and back work properly in the "city for ever undivided".

Indeed, an international recognition of Palestine would create new options for every government in Ramallah. Nowadays the High Court of Israel authorizes private land expropriations for the purpose to build roads, settlements, barriers, and military facilities; by those rulings the Court reaffirmed governmental arguments. The municipality of Jerusalem is considered as sovereign part of Israel. But after a positive vote in New York the Israeli desire to establish *faits accomplis* in the Palestinian territories may, from now on, be brought more easily to the attention of the bodies of the United Nations and the International Criminal Court in The Hague. An assessment of Israeli complaints about international delegitimization efforts shows that the policies in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem are considered a purely domestic matter – a position which has been called “the strategy of legal exceptionalism” (Michael Lynk).

Have Washington and Berlin woken up to the fact that the frustration and anger among the Palestinians over the national discrepancy between both parties have prompted popular narratives and scathing critiques on a scholarly level? Their aim is to strengthen already existing international views that political Zionism since the Balfour Declaration of 1917 together with the establishment of Israel in 1948 have turned out to be an ugly mistake in the course of colonialism and imperialism. The time may not be far away when the drums start

to convey the message that the two states on both sides of the borders of 1967 are no longer an option – not only because of the developments on the ground, but also in terms of political ethics. The insistence on numerical parity (“one man – one vote”) is becoming more forceful and therefore the existential risks for a state of Israel are getting closer.

Rashid I. Khalidi, the renowned American-Palestinian historian, opined that the week with Obama “can also be a salutary occasion for Palestinians and Arabs. It should finally cure those still infected with the diseased notion that they have anything to gain by bending to the importuning of American diplomacy. It should alleviate any doubt that there is any reason to avoid seeking entirely new means to achieve Palestinian national aims. … If this week in Washington did not make that crystal clear to even the most deluded Palestinian, presumably nothing will.”

For Hanan Ashrawi, disdainfully shoved aside by Yasser Arafat in 1994, the Palestinian leadership is recommended to send out "a very different message” to the international community: "You do not leave an occupied people at the mercy of those who occupy them and who act unilaterally in violation of international law by continuing to demolish homes, annex land, build settlements, erect apartheid walls and revoke IDs.”

One thing is sure: Until the young European attention for the Arab south and east of the Mediterranean is arriving at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, many more errors are likely to happen, while the number of urgent statements of well-known politicians, writers and intellectuals from around the world are pressing for a tenable peace settlement.

-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-.-