



SHLOMO AVINERI

Professor of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

With a new President to be shortly installed in the White House, it is only natural the most observers are hoping for a new US initiative pushing more vigorously for a Middle East peace initiative.

The intention is laudable. But the chances for a meaningful breakthrough in the deadlocked Israeli-Palestinian negotiations are slim. Why so?

There are the immediate reasons: Israel is in the throes of a government crisis, and even if there will be no new elections and Tzipi Livni will be able to stitch together a coalition, this may not be a very strong government and certainly may need time to put its house in order. On the Palestinian side, the Palestinian Authority under Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) is even weaker, having lost control in Gaza to the fundamentalist Hamas and its armed militias after a violent putsch last year. At a crucial moment for the Palestinians, they have once again failed to create the institutional structure necessary for nation-building: this has happened to them before, when a Palestinian uprising against British rule in Palestine in 1936-39 deteriorated into an bloody Palestinian civil war, in which more Palestinians were killed by their brethren than by the British army or the Jewish self-defense forces.

But there are deeper reasons for American inability to bring about an agreement, and they point both to American power – as well as its limits. Looking back at 60 years of US involvement in the region, one can discern two scenarios in which Washington is enormously powerful in bringing the local players to an agreement. Absent these conditions, the US is ultimately powerless.

The first of these scenarios is in a real war situation threatening to spill over into a wider conflict, destabilize the whole region or even impact Great Power relations. In such situations, resolute American steps can bring about an immediate stop to the fighting and impose if not peace then a cease-fire. Examples

*In 1973, at the end of the Yom Kippur War Israel was about to encircle a whole Egyptian army in Sinai and its troops were on the road to Cairo, threatening to inflict a major defeat on Egypt, which might have caused Soviet active intervention. A few tough messages from Washington to Jerusalem stopped the Israeli army in its tracks and enabled the Americans to start a lengthy process of de-escalation leading to a number of interim agreements.

*In 1982, during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Israeli troops were about to enter Moslem West Beirut after Syrian agents assassinated the pro-Israeli Lebanese President-elect Bashir Gemayel. This would probably have brought Syria into the war, and a few tough telephone calls from President Reagan to Israeli Prime Minister Begin prevented Israel from carrying out its intentions

*During the first Gulf War in 1991, when Iraq fired 39 missiles at Israeli civilian targets and US forces failed to stop Iraqi attacks, Israel was about to launch a major attack on Iraqi targets. This would have probably split the US-Arab anti-Iraq coalition: the US warned Israel not to get involved, and Israel had no choice but to comply.

In all these cases, American involvement was swift, focused on a clear and verifiable aim, and compliance – or lack of it – would be a matter of days if not hours, In such dramatic situations, US power is at its greatest.

The other scenario is its opposite: when the two sides have already been engaged in bilateral peace talks, have paid the internal price and have reached agreement on most issues, but some aspects remain unsolved and threaten to derail the whole process. In such a case, Washington can step in and, by using both the carrot and the stick, make both sides go the extra mile. Examples:

*After Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977, Israel and Egypt negotiated bilaterally for a whole year and reached agreement on most issues: peace between the two countries, diplomatic relations and full Israeli withdrawal from all occupied Egyptian territory in Sinai. But some issues still remained unsolved: here President Carter – who was initially



opposed to the whole process – had the wisdom to step in, invite both sides to Camp David and hammer out the final peace treaty between Israel and Egypt.

*Similarly, in 1993, Israel and the PLO reached in secret bilateral negotiations in Norway (unknown to the Americans) an agreement about mutual recognition and the setting up of a provisional Palestinian Autonomous Authority. Yet some issues remained unsolved, and here President Clinton stepped in, invited both sides to the White House and was able to prevail upon them to work out their remaining disagreements – leading to the public celebration of the Israel-PLO agreement on the White House lawn.

What is evident in the second scenario is that the US can be helpful if there is local political will, when both sides need is the extra push to reach a final agreement.

When either of these two scenarios is lacking, American initiatives are still-born. This happened to President Clinton at Camp David in 2000, when he failed to bring Prime Minister Barak and Chairman Arafat to an agreement; this happened similarly to President Bush's Road Map in 2003, where both sides agreed in principle to its general guiding lines – but very little happened in practice.

Absent local will, and when confronted with a peace making project that may take years to implement, the US is virtually powerless. As seen above, *it is extremely successful as a fire brigade or a midwife: but not as an initiator.* What applies to the US applies even more so to the European Union, whose "soft power" is no match for the lack of local political will.

This is so in other conflicts as well: for all its power, the US has continuously failed to resolve the conflicts in Cyprus, Bosnia or Kosovo. The Annan Plan failed in Cyprus because of the opposition of one party; if there is now some progress in Cyprus (the minor but symbolically important opening of Ledra Street crossing in downtown Nicosia) this is because of internal political changes on the Greek Cypriot side. Similarly, if Belgrade will change its obstreperous position on Kosovo, this will not be due to US or EU pressure, but due to internal political changes in Serbia.

Recognizing the limits of US power to broker a peace agreement in the Middle East doesn't mean it is irrelevant: it can stabilize the conflict, help bring about confidence building measures, and negotiate interim agreements. It can also be crucial to realize that perhaps the best way to move ahead is – as in the other conflicts mentioned – to replace somehow utopian plans for *conflict resolution* by a more realistic and pragmatic approach aiming at *conflict management* or *conflict containment*. Because at the end of the day, in the case of Israel-Palestine, as in any conflict between two national movements, the key is in the hands of the local players. No national conflict has ever been solved by outside powers, well-intentioned as they may be.

Shlomo Avineri is Professor of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He served as Director-General of Israel's Foreign Ministry in the first cabinet of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.