

Damage Control

A DUTCH journalist asked me last Wednesday to try and divine the thoughts of Binyamin Netanyahu on his way to Washington.

It seems that she was satisfied with the results, because she asked me to divine the thoughts of Mahmoud Abbas, too.

She must have liked that as well, because then she asked me to do the same for Barack Obama.

Here, then, is what I told her:

NETANYAHU'S THOUGHTS on the way to Washington:

The main thing is to minimize the damage.

Just now, someone asked me how I see our situation in four years time. Four years! I am thinking about what is going to happen in four weeks, when the settlement freeze is due to come to an end!

I feel like an officer on the bridge of the Titanic, who sees the awful iceberg looming up.

These settlers (yes, yes, I know I should call them "inhabitants of Judea and Samaria") cannot be trifled with. Impossible to reason with them and convince them to keep silent while we look for ways to get around the freeze.

Arik [Sharon] tried. When he planned the separation, he told the settlers: let's sacrifice a dozen small settlements in order to save the hundreds of others. Let's amputate a little finger in order to save the entire body. It didn't help. The settlers decided to fight for every single settlement.

Last year, when we started to discuss the freeze, I fought like a lion to limit it to ten months, instead of a year, as Obama had demanded. We both understood the difference: the ten months come to an end at the height of the American election campaign. A year would have finished after the elections. I thought that if the freeze came to an end in September, Obama wouldn't dare to press me to extend the moratorium. Jewish votes and Jewish money would make the difference.

I grew up in the States. I know how things work. AIPAC rules Congress. The politicians are afraid of us all the time, and even more so at election time. They know very well that if they don't support Israel, they will be kicked out.

But now we have a mess. Obama wants at all costs to do something that can be presented to the voters as a great achievement. But Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas] refuses to negotiate if we restart building in the settlements. So Obama pressures me to continue with the moratorium. If I agree, my coalition will break up. I have not forgotten that last time, in 1999, it was not the left that toppled my government, but my rightist partners.

For sure, Obama and his people will come up with

all sorts of compromise solutions. A "symbolic" freeze that will not really prevent us from building. Or a "symbolic" lifting of the moratorium, that will really prevent building. Or something on the lines of the Meridor proposal. That's a trial balloon I asked Dan to float in his name. [Minister without portfolio Dan Meridor proposed building only in the large settlement blocs that the government intends to annex to Israel.] But the settlers don't agree to that either.

So what to do? I don't know. I must rely on my talent for improvisation and get round this obstacle. But even if I succeed in postponing this matter until after September 26, it may blow up then. The main thing is to make sure the blame falls on Abu Mazen.

And peace? Don't make me laugh. I have no time for such foolishness. Clearly, the maximum I can offer does not even come close to the minimum they can accept. What, I should partition Jerusalem? I should dismantle the hundreds of settlements and outposts? I should give up the Jordan valley? I should agree to the return of even one refugee? Even if I wanted to – and I most decidedly do not! – I would be unable to do it. What, to break up the good coalition I have now and be dependent on that dreadful woman?

I shall not say so, of course. On the contrary, I shall shower them with highfalutin' words. I shall tell Abu Mazen that he is my partner. I shall talk about painful concessions. I shall sell myself as the New Netanyahu. (My God, how many times must I become the New Netanyahu?)

The main thing is to get safely out of this mess and preserve the status quo. The status quo is the best of all worlds.

ABBAS' THOUGHTS on the way to Washington:

The main thing is to minimize the damage.

Nothing good can come out of this. That's clear. But the blame must not fall on us.

I am sure that Abu Amar [Yasser Arafat] thought the same, when in 2000 he was dragged to Camp David. He knew that Ehud Barak and Bill Clinton would form a nutcracker, with him as the nut to be cracked.

OK, Obama is no Clinton. I trust him. He does indeed want to make peace. But can he? Until now, every time he tried, he gave in to Netanyahu in the end. Now he must compel Netanyahu to extend the settlement freeze. Can he do it?

I can't retreat from this demand. Hamas, may Allah punish them, is breathing down my neck. They are already cursing me for going to Washington at all (as if I had a choice). It would be ridiculous to negotiate while the settlements are being enlarged. As that young fellow, Michael Tarazi, so aptly put it: "It's like talking about dividing a pizza while they [the Israelis] are eating the pizza."

Hamas is trying to undercut me in every possible way. The killing of the four settlers near al-Khalil [Hebron] was designed to hurt the negotiations. It's really amazing how Hamas and the settlers are cooperating in trying to stop the peace process. But the incident also has a good side: the entire world has now seen what can be expected if I fail.

Hamas says that I serve the Americans. What do they propose as an alternative? To renew the armed struggle? They are even afraid to launch their Qassams! The attacks have achieved nothing. International public opinion cannot be relied on, either. Our only option is to rely on Obama. When they understand in Washington that the conflict hurts their own national interests, as this what's-his-name general [David Petraeus] has said, they will impose peace on the Israelis.

Abu Amar fixed the parameters, and no one among us can accept less: a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, the June 4, 1967 borders, limited 1:1 swaps of territory, the removal of all settlements from our territory, an agreed solution of the refugee problem with a symbolic return of some tens of thousands. I am ready to accept an international force on our land, but definitely not an Israeli armed presence. If I get such an agreement, Hamas will have no alternative but to go along with it. Palestinian public opinion will force them to.

They, too, have read the results of Dr. Nabil Kukali's poll this week: an unequivocal 2:1 majority of Palestinians support the two-state solution.

Can one rely on Obama? They say that after the elections in November he will be free of Jewish pressure. But then he will already start to think about the presidential election in two years' time. Only if he is reelected – and I am not at all sure that this will happen – will he be able to act without fear of AIPAC.

In the meantime, we must hold on. That is the main thing: to hold on and wait for time to do its work.

OBAMA'S THOUGHTS on the eve of the conference:

The main thing is to minimize the damage.

Before my election, I believed that one could influence people with logic. After all, peace is essential for the Israelis as much as for the Palestinians. What chance has Israel, if within a few years the entire Arab world falls into the hands of the extreme Islamists? And what chance will moderate Palestinians have? Don't they understand this? They drive me crazy.

[Henry] Kissinger said that Israel has no foreign policy, only domestic policy. That is true also for the Palestinians, and – alas – for us Americans, too. Domestic politics is dominant everywhere.

The economy is in a mess. The situation in Afghanistan is as bad as possible. (What the hell got into me during the election campaign, when I promised to go on with this war?!) The crackpots of the Tea Party are gathering momentum. I suspect that the Jewish lobby is secretly helping them. Who is running the campaign about me not having been born in the United States? A Jewish Israeli woman. And the campaign about me being a Muslim? Another Jewish woman. They want to bring me down. And why? Because I want to make peace, which is in Israel's best interest!

Now the main thing is to get through the elections in November without too heavy losses. As I told Rahm [Emanuel], at this point in time we must suck up to the Jews. That's why I appeased again and again that repugnant guy, Netanyahu. Now we must find some compromise about the settlement moratorium.

My God, here we are, leaders who are responsible for the fate of nations, busy with nonsense like the freeze, instead of concentrating on forging a peace that will save the lives of thousands and tens of thousands!

The main thing is to get September 26 behind us, when the moratorium comes to an end, and then the November 2 elections. After that, God knows. Perhaps I shall succeed, after all, in creating a situation which will allow me to present my own peace plan and impose it on them. Ever so softly, of course.

What the hell, aren't I the goddam President of the United States of America?