

The Middle East peace process

Get your plan ready, Mr Obama

As talks look set to resume, Barack Obama must prepare a big plan of his own



EVEN by the gloomy standards of the misnamed Middle East peace process, the prospect of a lasting deal between Jews and Arabs in that little strip of land between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean has seemed remoter than ever. Yet

the latest news offers a rare glimmer of hope. After more than a year of sullen stalemate, indirect talks between the two sides look set to resume (see page 38). Sadly they are likely to flounder unless the Americans do more than just nudge them along.

Sooner rather than later, Barack Obama must present his own detailed plan for peace. He must take the lead in providing Israel with the only guarantee of its lasting security: the creation of a proper state for the Palestinians.

A clutch of knowledgeable Americans who broadly agree with the two-state thesis have been advising Mr Obama not to get involved—at any rate, not yet. Another failed American attempt to mediate between Israelis and Palestinians, they argue, would make the world's flailing superpower less potent elsewhere, draining much-needed capital in its quest for regional peace in the no-less-troubled arc of discord that stretches from Iraq and Iran through to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Pessimists can produce any number of reasons why peace will not come: the Palestinians are divided, the governing Israeli coalition would split, neither side is prepared to give up enough. And yet the peace-hurriers have strong arguments too. Peace would transform a troubled region, whereas, left to fester, the conflict spreads its poison. Moreover, the outlines of the deal Bill Clinton nearly pulled off in 2000 remain clear. And as time passes and Israeli leaders like Binyamin Netanyahu entrench Jewish settlements on the land of a would-be Palestinian state, the harder it will become to prise them off it. Because time is not on the side of peace, it is unwise to wait.

Go for broke

Even so, the proximity talks seem likely, at best, to be a staging post on the way to an American plan to tackle the real issues. Mr Netanyahu, it is hopefully mooted, may free many of the 6,000-plus Palestinian militants in Israeli prisons. He may—and should—loosen and preferably lift the siege of Gaza, which is run by the Islamists of Hamas, who, while refusing to recognise Israel, have generally stopped firing rockets at it. And

he may endow the more amenable Palestinians who run the West Bank, the bigger part of a fledgling Palestinian state, with more economic and security powers. Most crucially, he may give tacit assurances, in the face of his own right wing, that he will suspend building in the Arab parts of East Jerusalem.

In any event, if talks are to get anywhere, the question of borders should be tackled first—not last, as Mr Netanyahu would prefer. Mr Abbas, speaking directly to Israelis on television this week, itself a rare event, conceded that the border may be adjusted, with land swaps to retain an area for the Palestinians equivalent in size and quality that they had as part of Jordan before 1967. Provided that the heart of East Jerusalem is protected as the Palestinian capital, some of the suburbs in what is occupied Palestinian territory could go to Israel, along with three or four of the main settlement blocks that are inhabited by more than four-fifths of the half a million Jewish settlers on the east side of the pre-1967 line, including the suburbs ringing Jerusalem. If this were agreed to early on, it would draw much of the poison out of the recent row over Jerusalem.

Even then an outside push may well be needed. That is why Mr Obama must soon set out his own grand plan, along the lines so nearly adopted at Camp David in 2000 and elaborated as the “Clinton parameters” shortly after the talks failed. If the borders can be established early on, with a formula for sharing Jerusalem and its holy places, Mr Obama can tackle the question of Palestinian refugees. The logic of having two states requires that Israel can be sure of keeping its large Jewish majority. Hence Mr Abbas will have to accept that Palestinians can have no actual right to return to the homes they lost after Israel was created in 1948. Instead, Israel could acknowledge the theoretical right of Palestinians to return and accept a small symbolic number who would not alter its demographic balance. Palestinians should be compensated with international help.

Mr Obama should also propose a NATO force under American command to monitor and secure a Palestinian border and ensure that a Palestinian state has limited military power. And he should come to Israel and sell his plan directly to Israelis, explaining why two states, including a shared Jerusalem, is the only way, in the long run, to make Israel safe. Mr Obama must dispatch the canard that he is hostile to the Jewish state. Being impatient with Israel does not mean he disregards it: he has repeatedly guaranteed Israel's security. But if the chance of building two co-existing states is not to fade, the Obama plan cannot be delayed much longer. ■

Tenga pronto il suo piano, Signor Obama (ag)