

## Tuesday, July 3, 2007

I arrive in Israel to a constantly changing landscape. Hamas and Fatah, which recently announced a Palestinian unity government in Gaza and the West Bank, have more recently fought a civil war. A coup has sent Fatah's Mahmoud Abbas to the West Bank. Gaza, which was once held by Israel, then held by Fatah, is now exclusively controlled by Hamas, which refuses to renounce its desire to annihilate Israel. Shimon Peres, Israel's Vice Premier, has just been selected as Israel's new President. Ehud Barak, the former Defense Minister and former Prime Minister, just became Defense Minister (again). Prime Minister Ehud Olmert clings to a five percentage approval rating but a governing majority of over 70 seats in the Knesset. And just as I arrive, key Cabinet seats in the Finance and the Interior Ministries are being shuffled and reshuffled.

Congressman Israel with Defense Minister Ehud Barak



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Israel's government is a set of moving pieces. But that is what a desert landscape is about -- sands shift constantly, burying and uncovering, creating new barriers and blowing away old ones. Desert timelessness is the lesson of this place. The sand may swirl and take new shape and form, but it remains sand -- transient in shape but permanent in form.

My last visit here was in August of 2005, on the very day that the last Israeli evacuated Gaza and it was turned over to the Palestinians without a reciprocal agreement, even a loose promise of peace. Israel said: "Take this place, and build peace and security. Build homes for your people, build schools for your children, build roads and jobs and a future. Show the world what kind of neighbor you can be."

There went the neighborhood.

What did the Palestinians build in Gaza?

Here are the indisputable facts:

They built Kassam missiles and hurled them over the border, at parts of Israel that predated the debate over 1967 borders. They sent terrorists across the Gaza border, kidnapped a soldier, and still hold him hostage today. They crossed the undisputed northern border with Lebanon, murdered soldiers, reined missiles on civilian towns and began a war. And in between Gaza in the South and Lebanon in the North, they continued to run suicide bombing operations to kill innocent civilians in restaurants and hotels and bus stops. They siphoned off money intended to build infrastructure for the Palestinian people and instead used it to build villas and feathered-nests. Then they went to war against themselves.

3 p.m. - I arrive in Tel Aviv on a warm and sunny day. I have one hour of down time before I am due at the U.S. Embassy for the official July 4th reception. I try to beg-off my security detail, but they flatly refuse. I guess you don't argue with guys with bulging shirts and wires coming out of their collars and coiling into their ears. So here I am, writing this blog, looking out at a brilliant afternoon yellow sun under the watchful gaze of 2 men in black.

TUESDAY NIGHT - "AMERICA! BROUGHT TO YOU BY McDONALDS!"

At the US Embassy Independence Day reception, I see a new incarnation of "checkbook diplomacy." To avoid spending taxpayer dollars on the reception, the entire affair is sponsored by McDonalds, Ben and Jerry's, Disney, Coca Cola and dozens of other American corporations. 2,500 people - including Prime Minister Olmert - are treated to a good old fashioned display of red, white, blue. . . and green. Corporate sponsors exhibit their products and dish out their foods. Historic American icons are flashed on a large screen, and I envision what could come next: perhaps George Washington crossing the Delaware on an Evinrude boat? On the other hand, we are building commercial bridges, showcasing American exports and saving taxpayer dollars. And there is something special about speaking with Jordan's jovial-seeming Ambassador to Israel at a July 4th reception (with fireworks) in Tel Aviv, while people around us munch on Big Macs.

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**Wednesday, July 4, 2007**

7 a.m. - I eat breakfast alone -- except for those two security guys sitting at a table across from me. (A third advances every location, always a step ahead of us). The Mediterranean sweeps around me -- waves lap in from a nearby jetty and a gentle morning breeze massages Israeli flags. It is an idyllic setting. I am then approached by an American who is chairing a mission of United Jewish Communities. The prior day, 40 of his members were visiting Sderot, an Israeli town about four miles from Gaza, when a Kassam missile screamed across the sky and landed in their midst. No one was injured -- other than the psychological trauma. The crude Kassam missiles have a range of about six to eight miles -- which gives people exactly 21 seconds of warning before impact. Think about that: just 21 seconds.

### 9 a.m. - MEETING WITH GENERAL AMOS GILAD

At the Israeli Defense Ministry, I receive a briefing from General Amos Gilad on a wide range of security threats to Israel.

He expresses deep concern over Hezbollah's rearming in southern Lebanon. They are receiving a steady supply of missiles with longer and longer ranges, and sophisticated training as well. Meanwhile Iran continues its development of nuclear missiles, seeking a chilling strategic advantage and a psychological one as well. Finally, the smuggling of arms continues from Egypt into Gaza.

### 10 a.m. - SHIMON PERES

"I am an unpaid dreamer," Shimon Peres tells me as we sit in his office.

Meeting Peres is like linking with history. In the lobby of his office are photos with Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion; Peres at the side of Golda Meir; Peres at the White House with almost every recent U.S President.

Peres will be inaugurated as Israel's President on July 15, 2007. It will cap a historic career at the height of Israeli politics and diplomacy. It is the perfect place for such a visionary.

Israeli President-elect Shimon Peres shows Congressman Israel the Red Sea-Dead Sea Conveyance Project on a map



Israeli President-elect Shimon Peres shows Congressman Israel the Red Sea Conveyance Project on a map. His dreams include "The Red Sea-Dead Sea Conveyance Project" - a massive project between Israel, Jordan and Palestinians to restore the Dead Sea (which is disappearing at an alarming rate), and create fresh-water supplies throughout the region to spur economic development. He also tells me that Israel is seeking the capability to become a major "electric battery" manufacturing center.

I believe that the U.S. and Israel share an extraordinary convergence on energy issues. We both have a dependence on foreign oil and we both possess a high-technology expertise in our universities and businesses that can beat that dependence.

Congressman Israel speaking with Israeli Knesset Speaker Dalia Itzik



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Shimon Peres, a true pioneer of Israel, talks about nanotechnology, micro-electronics, hydropower and solar energy as a key to peace. He is the link between history and the future.

At the same time, he presents the very real and stark choices being made every day in Israel. A psychiatrist told him of a young mother in Sderot who couldn't sleep at night. She told the doctor "I have three children. When the missiles come, I can grab one child, my husband can grab the other. How do we make the choice which child not to grab?"

12 p.m. - VISIT TO THE KNESSET (ISRAEL'S CONGRESS)

Knesset member Abu Vilan and I have been working to develop a U.S. Congressional-Israeli Knesset Dialogue. Vilan is well-respected in Israel, a sturdy former military leader who helps lead a new generation of leaders. Vilan escorts me through the Knesset Building, introducing me to Cabinet Ministers and fellow parliamentarians. On the Knesset floor, Prime Minister Olmert sits alone, listening to Vilan speak during debate. Former Prime Minister Netanyahu sits behind him.

2 p.m. - CONSTITUENTS AT THE WESTERN WALL



The security detail and a U.S. Embassy staffer lead me to the plaza at the Western Wall - a center of Jewish faith and biblical archeology at the same time. I have been here many times in my life, but each time is a reawakening. As my eyes sweep across the ancient expanse of

stone, I hear some voices say: "He's our Congressman. Can we say hello?" There, thousands of miles from Long Island, I have an opportunity to meet my constituents. There, in the shadows of the Western Wall.

### 4 p.m. - MEETING WITH ISRAEL INTERIOR MINISTRY

My fixation with our oil dependence brings me to the Israeli Interior Ministry for meetings on renewable technologies. Israel imports 100 percent of its oil and has virtually no meaningful sources of domestic energy supply. It operates on coal from South Africa and Mexico; and oil from Black Sea nations. Only about 1 percent of its energy portfolio is from renewable technologies, though it hopes to reach 10 percent by the year 2020. It seems that a nation that tamed a desert wilderness and defeated foes that surrounded it, a nation blessed with abundant sun, can push new technological frontiers and be a global leader in advanced energy sciences. I intend to focus on this as part of my comprehensive Next Generation Energy Security Initiative.

### 5 p.m. - MEETING WITH THE PRIME MINISTER'S CHIEF OF STAFF



Yoram Turbowicz is Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. As we speak he and Knesset members are negotiating a reshuffling of the Cabinet. Over small cups of coffee and a bowl of chocolate candy, he describes the complexities of Israeli politics and the peace process.

Israel has just decided to resume payments of tax revenues to Fatah. But the decision is a difficult one. Fatah may be considered the more "reasonable" of Palestinian groups, and its leader, Abu Mazen, may reflect a certain pragmatism, but it has demonstrated no capacity to govern or even to keep its promises. How can one come to terms with an interlocutor that is unable to enforce the terms?

Dealing with an unreliable partner, in fact, working to strengthen that partner as an alternative to one that is irredeemable "is not the preferred option," says the Chief of Staff.

In view of the reality on the ground, I add, "it is the least bad option."

Today, that is the central choice in foreign policy and Middle East politics -- working to find the least bad option.

9 p.m. - After a cross-country drive from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, and dinner with Knesset Member Vilan, I meet with Defense Minister (and former Prime Minister) Ehud Barak. In his spacious office, the Minister discusses the challenges confronting Israel. He is mounting a "comeback" effort in Israeli politics, having served as Defense Minister, then Prime Minister, now Defense Minister again. Much of Israel speculates that he could be Prime Minister again.

11 p.m. - We drive from Tel Aviv back to Jerusalem. Want to understand how small a country is and why giving up land is so difficult? I've made 3 cross country trips in twelve hours. Time to call it a night!

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### Thursday, July 5, 2007

"We Mean Business, Congressman."



After a series of meetings with various U.S. diplomatic and military officials at the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem, I am driven to Ramallah (in the West Bank) for a meeting with Salem Fayyad, the new Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority.

I enter an armored SUV and receive a detailed security briefing. The precautions are elaborate because we are entering a "high threat area." The 40-minute ride -- with a chase car behind us -- brings me past Palestinian and Jewish communities that spread across hills and into valleys.

About 160,000 people live in Ramallah and the main commercial strip on which we drive is bustling. There are Sanyo appliance stores, rug shops, outdoor restaurants and a Ford dealership. Yellow and orange Lipton tea signs hang everywhere proclaiming: "The sign of good taste." A mosque rises at an intersection, just behind the "Pizza House." And a few modern office buildings, in beige stone, overlook the commercial district.

We pull into the Prime Minister's office. A security team surrounds our car, their backs against the windows. After a signal is given, my door is opened and I am quickly escorted through a phalanx of security into a building.

The Prime Minister's office is small and spartan--and what real estate professionals would likely call a "Relo." It was occupied quickly and recently only because Hamas drove Fatah's ministers from their permanent headquarters in Gaza.

Within minutes, Prime Minister Fayyad breezes through the door. Throughout my trip, I have

heard repeatedly that he is the "last best chance for peace." But I remember hearing the same sentiments about Palestinian President Abbas, who failed to demonstrate leadership, organize security forces, and govern his people. Still, Fayyad does have a demonstrated record of accomplishments as a World Bank economist and a financial reformer. He is widely regarded for bringing greater transparency and accountability as the Palestinian Authority Finance Minister.

We sit next to each other, separated by a small table. The U.S. Consul General in Jerusalem sits on a nearby couch with two members of his staff.

After exchanging some pleasantries, Fayyad expresses a desire to improve relations with Congress and notes that he must demonstrate progress in governance, security and accountability. "We mean business, Congressman," he says. "If we show accountability and transparency, if we do the right things, we know that Congress will appreciate it and you will also do the right thing."

I thank him for a step he took the prior day: stripping 23,000 Hamas-affiliated personnel from the payroll. The decision resulted in a Hamas attack on the former Finance Ministry building in Gaza. But Fayyad reports that Fatah has rebuilt its financial systems so that despite Hamas' military success in Gaza, it has been unable to access funds from the Palestinian Authority treasury.

Finally, the Prime Minister acknowledges that security is a prerequisite for progress on other issues, noting that "the starting point is to prevent Gaza from expanding to the West Bank. We face extremists and want to bring conflict with Israel to an end."

For about 30 minutes we exchange views on Israel, on the peace process and on the role of the United States. Then he escorts me to the front door of the building and sees me off with a handshake and a smile.

In my six years of Congress, I have learned that the best intentions, the kindest smiles, and the warmest handshakes cannot constitute foreign policy. If those were the standards of success the world would be a much happier place. We should want Prime Minister Fayyad to succeed; and the Israelis were adamant about that in our conversations. But they know that success is measured by deed. By keeping promises, by reducing threat, by teaching coexistence. By stopping the firing of Kassam missiles and the suicide bombings.

Fayyad may indeed be as he was described throughout my trip: "the last best hope for peace." But at some point, how many "last best hopes" can we have? I am slightly more optimistic than I was before. But this "last best hope" should be measured by action, not by wishful thinking.

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**Friday, July 6, 2007**



An Israeli military unit assembles at the Western Wall

5:15 a.m. - The security detail escorts me to the cabin of my plane. It will be a long flight home. As we taxi, a pink sky spreads over the early dawn in Tel Aviv and we enter a new morning with new hopes and ancient challenges.

Posted by: SI