

CLINTON TO STATE? IS MID-EAST PEACE BACK ON THE TABLE?

✖ There has been a lot of chatter the last 48 hours or so about Obama considering Hillary Clinton for Secretary of State. The chatter practically exploded this afternoon with the report that the President-Elect had formally offered the job to her and she was considering the offer.

Most all of the discussion to date as to why Barack Obama might be so motivated has centered on the "Team of Rivals" aspect and the general cache of the Clinton name internationally and diplomatically.

Perhaps the best take in this regard was stated by Ian Welsh at FDL:

Clinton does offer one big advantage as Secretary of State: the Clinton name. The Clintons are loved overseas, and there is no one else in America (other than her husband, who will presumably be by her side in any case) who would demonstrate more clout than having Hilary Clinton arrive in your country. Likewise she already has relationships with many world leaders and doesn't have to build up that trust from scratch. Clinton can hit the ground running, and assuming Obama makes it clear that he's backing her, she can speak with more authority than perhaps anyone else could, on his behalf.

Indeed. But what strikes me is that, if Obama really has made the offer to Clinton, he may have in mind not just the obvious skills (and potential detriments) that Hillary Clinton could bring to the job, but also making a bold play for mid-east peace and specifically the

Israeli/Palestinian component of it.

George Bush has never paid more than lip service to honest brokerage of real peace and rapprochement between Israel and the Palestinians. Even the supposedly vaunted "Roadmap" was nothing but rhetorical roadkill on delivery, and his efforts have gone downhill since then. Condi Rice has been useless at best on the issue, and Dick Cheney, well, enough said there.

But Bill Clinton came as close as anybody in recent memory, actually decades, to actually getting a deal done. Bill Clinton was actively engaged in trying to foster a "final settlement" to the I/P problem his entire presidency, but took a crippling hit when Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated. The initial promise of the Oslo Accords went unfulfilled, and the final settlement that had been contemplated, unrealized. President Clinton made one last push for the elusive "final settlement" right before leaving office with the Camp David Summit.

For a variety of reasons, most notably the last second reticence, after initial acquiescence, of Yassar Arafat if reports are to be believed, Camp David went to dust. Perhaps sand. The key here is that, to both sides of the equation, Clinton was seen as an "honest broker". The simple logistical fact is that there will be no I/P peace without the sincere and active participation by the United States Government via its Executive.

If Barack Obama is indeed going to make an early and strong play on the I/P issue, it is hard to imagine who could bring more cache and weight to the attempt than Hillary Clinton. And make no mistake about it, if Obama wants to truly make his "change" global, there is no bigger key than the Palestinian problem. So much really is predicated on it and flows from it. Want to really change the world? Man, is that the prime festering sore to start with. If there is any line of dominoes, that is the initiator.

Halfway through writing this piece, I came across an article from last Monday by Georgie Anne Geyer, that lays out the argument for Clinton on the potential I/P effort by Obama perfectly.

But missed in the avalanche is the fact that we face a moment of unique hope. Where? Strangely enough, in that ever "hopeless" morass of the Middle East. In fact, when you put all the dominant factors in the region together and look carefully at the intersections of interests, we might be on the brink of the best chance for a real Israeli-Palestinian peace since the Jimmy Carter administration.

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Despite these very real factors, deep changes are occurring inside Israel itself. Little-reported, for some reason, were the outgoing words of former Likudnik Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, long of the Israeli hard right, when he went against all of his past and stated that Israel would eventually have to give up almost all the lands it conquered in 1967, including the Arab parts of Jerusalem.

Also this fall, the Israeli government announced it would cut off funding for illegal settlement outposts and crack down on extremist squatters (thus acknowledging Israel's complicity in their formation), after its domestic security service director, Shin Bet chief Yuval Diskin, told a cabinet meeting that he is "very concerned" that Jewish extremists were going to attempt to assassinate moderate Israeli leaders.

Indeed, outgoing Prime Minister Olmert also warned at the meeting, showing the degree of concern that is growing even among former members of the anti-peace right: "There is a group, that is not

small, of wild people who behave in a way that threatens proper law and governance. ... This is unacceptable and we cannot countenance it."

At the same time, profound changes are taking place within Israel. The fate of Jerusalem, one of the world's most exquisite cities – and the historic site of the birth and development of the three great religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam – lies in careless hands. Not a single Israeli of national stature has stepped forward to run for mayor of the city, a post that always offered immense stature. The formerly glimmering Near Eastern capital is now the poorest town in Israel, with a third of families and more than half of the children living below the official poverty line.

Meron Benvenisti, the respected former deputy mayor and a great historian of the city, was quoted recently as saying, "This city is a conundrum without a solution."

As to the Palestinians, it is surely true that one cannot expect great and mature moves from them – but what has been lost in most of the U.S.-Israeli discussions is that that is essentially unimportant. The United States and Israel are the dominant players in this unfortunate game. They can still do what both have refused to do for at least the last eight years, which is to set up a just and reasonable peace process. If it is imposed and fairly carried through by the two major players, there is every reason to believe that the Palestinians will follow, if only because they would have to."

Now the fascinating thing here is that Geyer had the wrong Clinton; she was suggesting naming

Bill Clinton as American Middle East envoy.

I think Barack Obama may be a step ahead of Georgie Anne Geyer, and the rest of us too. Obama may be thinking bigger and bolder than any of us have given him credit for. A real, and audacious, move on "final settlement" of the I/P problem may be up his sleeve, and that may just be a good chunk of his motive in considering Hillary Clinton for Secretary of State; and, if that is the case, Clinton starts to make a whole lot of sense.

UPDATE: One more point I intended to put in the post, but neglected to include before I posted, is the roster of calls that Vice-President Elect Joe Biden made Monday and Tuesday of this week (h/t Marcy). Take a look at the list:

- Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni
- Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak
- Israeli Likud Leader Binyamin (Bibi) Netanyahu
- Polish President Lech Kaczynski
- British Prime Minister Gordon Brown
- Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair
- Afghan President Hamid Karzai
- King Abdullah of Jordan

Only Karzai and Kaczynski are not directly related to the I/P issue; the former, Karzai, has an abiding interest in it, and the latter, Kaczynski, was a call Biden made to straighten out some confusion on missile defense that exists from Bush/Cheney belligerence on the issue. If one is thinking the incoming Obama Administration has an I/P peace push up its sleeve, this certainly supports the thought.