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### **Baker's Cake**

NO ONE likes to admit a mistake. Me neither. But honesty leaves me no choice.

A few days after the collapse of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, I happened to go on a lecture tour in the US.

My message was optimistic. I expected some good to come out of the tragedy. I reasoned that the atrocity had exposed the intensity of the hatred for the US that is spreading throughout the world, and especially the Muslim world. It would be logical not only to fight against the mosquitoes, but to drain the swamp. Since the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was one of the breeding grounds of the hatred - if not the main one - the US would make a major effort to achieve peace between the two peoples.

That was what cold logic indicated. But this is not what happened. What happened was the very opposite.

American policy was not led by cold logic. Instead of drying one swamp, it created a second swamp. Instead of pushing the Israelis and Palestinians towards peace, it invaded Iraq. Not only did the hatred against America not die down, it flared up even higher. I hoped that this danger would override even the oil interests and the desire to station an American garrison in the center of the Middle East.

Thus I committed the very mistake that I have warned others against many times: to assume that what is logical will actually happen. A rational person should not ignore the irrational in politics. In other words, it is irrational to exclude the irrational.

George W. Bush is an irrational person, perhaps the very personification of irrationality. Instead of drawing the logical conclusion from what had happened and acting accordingly, he set off in the opposite direction. Since then he has just insisted on "staying the course".

Enter James Baker.

SINCE I am already in a confessional mood, I have to admit that I like James Baker.

I know that this will shock some of my good friends. "Baker?!" they will cry out, "The consigliere of the Bush family? The man who helped George W steal the 2000 elections? The Rightist?"

Yes, yes, the very same Baker. I like him for his cold logic, his forthright and blunt style, his habit of saying what he thinks without embellishment, his courage. I prefer this style to the sanctimonious hypocrisy of other leaders, who try to hide their real intentions. I would be happy any time to swap Olmert for Baker, and throw in Amir Peretz for free.

But that is a matter of taste. More important is the fact that in all the last 40 years, James Baker was the only leader in America who had the guts to stand up and act against Israel's malignant disease: the settlements. When he was the Secretary of State, he simply informed the Israeli government that he would deduct the sums expended on the settlements from the money Israel was getting from the US. Threatened and made good on his threat.

Baker thus confronted the "pro-Israeli" lobby in the US, both the Jewish and the Christian. Such courage is rare in the United States, as it is rare in Israel.

THIS WEEK the Iraq Study Group, led by Baker, published its report.

It confirms all the bleak forecasts voiced by many throughout the world - myself included - before Bush & Co. launched the bloody Iraqi adventure. In his dry and incisive style, Baker says that the US cannot win there. In so many words he tells the American public: Let's get out of there, before the last American soldier has to scramble into the last helicopter from the roof of the American embassy, as happened in Vietnam.

Baker calls for the end of the Bush approach and offers a new and thought-out strategy of his own. Actually, it is an elegant way of extricating America from Iraq, without it looking like a complete rout. The main proposals: an American dialogue with Iran and Syria, an international conference, the withdrawal of the American combat brigades, leaving behind only instructors. The committee that he headed was bi-partisan, composed half and half of Republicans and Democrats.

FOR ISRAELIS, the most interesting part of the report is, of course, the one that concerns us directly. It interests me especially - how could it be otherwise? - because it repeats, almost word for word, the things I said immediately after September 11, both in my articles at home and in my lectures in the US.

True, Baker is saying them four years later. In these four years, thousands of American soldiers and tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians have died for nothing. But, to use the image again, when a giant ship like the United States turns around, it makes a very big circle, and it takes a lot of time. We, in the small speed-boat called Israel, could do it much quicker - if we had the good sense to do it.

Baker says simply: In order to stop the war in Iraq and start a reconciliation with the Arab world, the US must bring about the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He does not say explicitly that peace must be imposed on Israel, but that is the obvious implication.

In his own clear words: *"The United States will not be able to achieve its goals in the Middle East unless the United States deals directly with the Arab-Israeli conflict."*

His committee proposes the immediate start of negotiations between Israel and "President Mahmoud Abbas", in order to implement the two-state solution. The

"sustainable negotiations" must address the "key final status issues of borders, settlements, Jerusalem, the right of return, and the end of conflict."

The use of the title "President" for Abu Mazen and, even more so, the use of the term "right of return" has alarmed the whole political class in Israel. Even in the Oslo agreement, the section dealing with the "final status" issues mentions only "refugees". Baker, as is his wont, called the spade a spade.

At the same time, he proposes a stick and carrot approach to achieve peace between Israel and Syria. The US needs this peace in order to draw Syria into its camp. The stick, from the Israeli point of view, would be the return of the Golan Heights. The carrot would be the stationing of American soldiers on the border, so that Israel's security would be guaranteed by the US. In return, he demands that Syria stop, inter alia, its aid to Hizbullah.

After Gulf War I, Baker - the same Baker - got all the parties to the conflict to come to an international conference in Madrid. For that purpose, he twisted the arm of then Prime Minister Itzhak Shamir, whose entire philosophy consisted of two letters and one exclamation mark: "No!" and whose slogan was: "The Arabs are the same Arabs, and the sea is the same sea" - alluding to the popular Israeli conviction that the Arabs all want to throw Israel into the sea.

Baker brought Shamir to Madrid, his arms and legs in irons, and made sure he did not escape. Shamir was compelled to sit at the table with representatives of the Palestinian people, who had never been allowed to attend an international conference before. The conference itself had no tangible results, but there is no doubt that it was a vital step in the process that brought about the Oslo agreement and, more difficult than anything else, the mutual recognition of the State of Israel and the Palestinian people.

Now Baker is suggesting something similar. He proposes an international conference, and cites Madrid as a model. The conclusion is clear.

HOWEVER, THIS baker can only offer a recipe for the cake. The question is whether President Bush will use the recipe and bake the cake.

Since 1967 and the beginning of the occupation, several American Secretaries of State have submitted plans to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. All these plans met the same fate: they were torn up and thrown in the trash.

The same sequence of events has been repeated time after time: In Jerusalem, hysteria sets in. The Foreign Office stands up on its hind legs and swears to defeat the evil design. The media unanimously condemns the wicked plot. The Secretary of State of the day is pilloried as an anti-Semite. The Israeli lobby in Washington mobilizes for total war.

For example: the Rogers Plan of Richard Nixon's first Secretary of State, William Rogers. In the early 70s he submitted a detailed peace plan, the principal point of which was the withdrawal of Israel to the 1967 borders, with, at most, "insubstantial alterations".

What happened to the plan?

In face of the onslaught of "the Friends of Israel" in Washington, Nixon buckled under, as have all presidents since Dwight D. Eisenhower, a man of principle who did not need the Jewish votes. No president will quarrel with the government of Israel if he wants to be re-elected, or - like Bush now - to end his term in office with dignity and pass the presidency to another member of his party. Any senator or congressman who takes a stand that the Israeli embassy does not like, is committing Harakiri, Washington-style.

The fate of the peace plans of successive Secretaries of State confirms, on the face of it, the thesis of the two professors, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, that caused a great stir earlier this year. According to them, whenever there is a clash in Washington between the national interests of the United States and the national interests of Israel, it is the Israeli interests which win.

WILL THIS happen this time, too?

Baker has presented his plan at a time when the US is facing disaster in Iraq. President Bush is bankrupt, his party has lost control of Congress and may soon lose the White House. The neo-conservatives, most of them Jews and all of them supporters of the Israeli extreme Right, who were in control of American foreign policy, are being removed one by one, and this week yet another, the American ambassador to the United Nations, was kicked out. Therefore, it is possible that this time the President may listen to expert advice.

But that is in serious doubt. The Democratic Party is subject to the "pro-Israeli" lobby no less than the Republican Party, and perhaps even more. The new congress was indeed elected under the banner of opposition to the continuation of the war in Iraq, but its members are not jihadi suicide bombers. They depend on the "pro-Israeli" lobby. To paraphrase Shamir: "The plan is the same plan, and the trash bin is the same trash bin."

In Jerusalem, the first reaction to the report was total rejection, expressing a complete confidence in the ability of the lobby to choke it at birth. "Nothing has changed," Olmert declared. "There is no one to talk with," - immediately echoed by the mouth and pen brigade in the media. "We cannot talk with them as long as the terrorism goes on," a famous expert declared on TV. That's like saying: "One cannot talk about ending the war as long as the enemy is shooting at our troops."

On the Mearsheimer-Walt thesis I wrote that "the dog is wagging the tail and the tail is wagging the dog." It will be interesting to see which will wag which this time: the dog its tail or the tail its dog.