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# THREE IN A BED

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**T**he President of the United States and the President of the Palestinian Authority!” intoned the voice, as the two leaders appeared before the journalists during the recent visit of Mahmud Abbas to the White House.

George Bush also addressed his visitor as “President Abbas”, and not accidentally. The use of this appellation was a deliberate choice.

At the office of Prime Minister Sharon, there was much gnashing of teeth. Almost all the Israeli media passed it over in silence. But it may well be that of the fruits harvested by Mahmud Abbas (“Abu-Mazen”) in Washington DC, this one was the most important.

In order to understand that, one has to go back. During the negotiations which led to the 1993 Oslo agreement, there was much controversy about the title appropriate for Yasser Arafat. The Palestinians demanded that he be called “President”, the Israelis agreed only to refer to him as “Chairman”.

Why? Well, “president” sounds like a head of state. States have presidents. Ordinary institutions normally have chairpersons. The Israeli negotiators did not agree at all that the Palestinian Authority, which was set up by the agreement, should have the attributes of a state.

The compromise eventually reached was made possible by the peculiarities of the Arabic language. Arabic (like French) uses the same word for president and chairman. Both are called Ra’is (from Ras, head). Therefore the agreement says, in all its three versions (English, Hebrew and Arabic) that the chief of the Palestinian Authority will bear the title of “Ra’is”.

Since then, all the Israeli media, as well as all Israeli politicians and diplomats, insisted on calling Arafat “Chairman of the Palestinian Authority”. Nowadays, they stick this label on Abu-Mazen.

Therefore, when Bush calls his guest “President Abbas”, it is a slap in the face for Israeli diplomacy and an intentional boost for the prestige of the Palestinian leader.

The next step may be an upgrading of the Authority itself. In Oslo, the Palestinians

demanded that it be called “The Palestinian National Authority”. The Israeli side objected strenuously and agreed only to “The Palestinian Authority”. They insisted on this with all their might. When, in contravention of the agreement, the Palestinians printed postage stamps bearing the legend “Palestinian National Authority”, they were forced to destroy the whole batch and print new ones with the agreed name.

In spite of this, all the official papers of the Authority nowadays bear the proud legend: “The Palestinian National Authority”.

A similar battle has been taking place since Oslo about the name “Palestine”. When the Palestinians were accorded “observer” status at the UN, their sign read “Palestine Liberation Organization”. After a prolonged and tenacious struggle, led by the able nephew of Arafat, Nasser al-Kidwah, this sign was replaced by another, reading simply “Palestine”. More and more international institutions now recognize the entity called “Palestine” – as if the State of Palestine already existed.

Not in Israel, of course. True, even here there is no way one can avoid speaking about “a Palestinian state”, and even Ariel Sharon is ready to use this term for the archipelago of disconnected enclaves he wants to present the Palestinians, but no self-respecting Israeli will let the term “State of Palestine” pass his lips. Before that happens, the Chief Rabbi will publicly eat pork, God forbid.

The fight over the Palestinian state-like attributes has sometimes assumed grotesque proportions. In Oslo, the negotiators squabbled for weeks about what to call it: a Palestinian “travel document” or “passport”? The Israelis would not agree under any circumstances to call it a passport, since passports are issued only by states or supra-national institutions and the like. The Palestinians insisted, and in the end a compromise was found: on the top of the cover the words “travel document” appear, and at the bottom “passport”. The Palestinians tried to be clever and printed them the other way round, but again they had to pulp the whole batch and produce new ones.

What else did Bush give Abu-Mazen, apart from his anointment as “Mr. President”?

Very much or very little – depends on your point of view.

The Prime Minister’s men are quite right when they argue that Bush gave him nothing new. It has all been said before. But when Bush repeats everything he has said on various occasions and ties it all together in one bundle, it acquires a new meaning. Quantity becomes quality, as Marx used to say.

According to Bush, the State of Palestine will come into being. When? That was not said. There is no timetable.

Bush spoke about “Gaza, the West Bank and Jerusalem”. The explicit mention of Jerusalem is a big blow to Sharon, who declared at about the same time that all of Jerusalem will remain Israeli “for the eternity of eternities”. Not just eternity, but

“eternity of eternities”. (In the past he made the same proclamation about the Netzarim and Kfar-Darom settlements in the Gaza Strip, which he is supposed to evacuate in three months time. A very short eternity, indeed. Sort of mini-eternity.)

The borders between Israel and Palestine will be determined, according to Bush, only by negotiation and mutual agreement. How does this conform with his written assurance to Sharon, that the “large population centers” (presumably meaning the big Israeli settlements in the West Bank) will become part of Israel? Perhaps there is no contradiction: the borders will be fixed by negotiations, but the United States will support the Israeli claim.

Does this preclude a solution? Not necessarily. On several occasions, Palestinians have said that they might agree to a limited swap of territories on the basis of 1:1.

Bush did not spell out – neither to Sharon nor to Abbas – which “population centers” he has in mind. Sharon always mentions Ma’aleh Adumim, Ariel, Gush Etzion and other settlements. From American utterances, it is fairly clear that Bush does not include Ma’aleh Adumim, the annexation of which would split the West Bank into two, and Ariel, which is 25 km from the Green Line. But settlements like Alfei Menasheh, Modi’in Illit, Efrat and Betar Illit, which are located near the Green Line, may be included in the American “vision”.

Bush threw in an interesting remark: that this will be the American position throughout the negotiations. What does he mean? That this commits his successors, too, or that he will bring the negotiations to an end before the conclusion of his second and final term in 2008?

Bush’s music certainly sounded sweet to the ears of Abu-Mazen, but it must have grated on Sharon.

True, the music does not change the facts. For now, everything goes on as before: the building of the wall, the annexation of land, the enlargement of settlements. But when the music changes, the facts may also gradually be brought into harmony.

The Prime Minister finds himself in the embarrassing situation of a man who lies in bed with his wife and discovers, to his surprise, that there is another man in the bed. And not just another man, but a president to boot.

He will, of course, do everything he can to get him out of there.





**AVNERY | SHARON'S SKIN AND BUSH'S SPOTS**