

Questions for Dan Gillerman

Contributed by NYTimes, DEBORAH SOLOMON
Sunday, 20 July 2008

Diplomatic Impunity

As the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, you are about to leave your post after nearly six years and return to Tel Aviv at a time when Iran is releasing touched-up photographs of its latest missile tests and continuing to enrich uranium in defiance of U.N. sanctions. How seriously do you take their threats? Listen to Ahmadinejad, who denies the Holocaust while planning the next one, who talks about wiping Israel off the face of the map — listen to him, and take him at face value.

But what if it's all bluster? Maybe he's just a short man who needs to pontificate. For too long, much of the world, including Neville Chamberlain, believed that Hitler was just a crazy short man. I don't think we can afford to do it again.

Considering the long and illustrious history of the Persians, isn't it unlikely that the Iranians would ever do anything reckless with nuclear weapons? The real fear is not that the Iranians will be crazy enough or stupid enough to launch a missile at Israel, but that they will have no compunction about providing rogue regimes and terror organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah with weapons of mass destruction.

You recently called Jimmy Carter a "bigot" after he met with Khaled Meshal, the head of Hamas. Is it true you were reprimanded by the U.S. State Department? There was no complaint or reprimand. The only reaction I received was very positive.

The Bush administration, it seems, has not done much to advance the Mideast peace process. Would you agree? I think the key is in the Arab world. The Palestinians' real tragedy is that they have not been able to produce a Nelson Mandela. Every single day, Muslims are killed by Muslims. You do not see a single Muslim leader get up and say, "Enough is enough." It's nearly as if we live in a world where if Christians kill Muslims, it's a crusade. If Jews kill Muslims, it's a massacre. And when Muslims kill Muslims, it's the Weather Channel. Nobody cares.

What about Mahmoud Abbas, the impressively moderate head of the Palestinian Authority? I am not saying Abbas is a Mandela. But at least he is willing to talk, and the Arab world should stand with him and legitimize him and stand against the extremists. They are not doing that.

Of the 192 ambassadors from as many countries at the U.N., do any of them refuse to speak to you? I say hello to everyone. The ambassadors who do not say hello to me are the Iranian, the Syrian and the Libyan, whose mere presence on the Security Council is scandalous. No co-op board in this city would even consider letting Libya buy an apartment, yet the U.N. gives it a seat on the world body responsible for peace and security.

What is your security like? It is very tight 24-7. When my wife and I go to the movies, our main worry is maybe we picked a movie our security men won't like. Usually two or three bodyguards sit in the row behind us.

Who buys their tickets? They do. They are having a great time.

You are about to be replaced at the U.N. by Gabriela Shaley, a law professor at Ono Academic College with no experience as a diplomat. Can any regular person be a diplomat? I'm sure Gaby will do great. Diplomacy is not something you can learn at school or in the foreign service. A diplomat is a person who can tell you to go to hell and actually make you look forward to the journey.

Whom would you like to see win the presidential election in this country? I don't think it would be right for me to voice an opinion on American politics. I would be crucified. This is the worst gaffe you can make as a diplomat, to take sides.

You're wearing a tie decorated with elephants. Is that a sign of your loyalty to the Republican candidate? No, no, my loyalty is to pink elephants.

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED, CONDENSED AND EDITED BY DEBORAH SOLOMON