



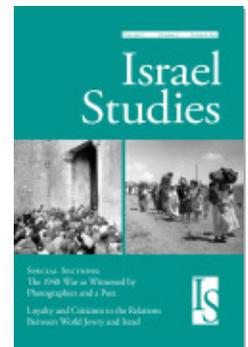
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So Close and Yet So Far: Lessons from the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process

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So Close and Yet So Far

Lessons from the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process

“**I**NSTEAD OF REPEATEDLY REJECTING THE Israelis’ proposals, make counter proposals,”¹ US President Bill Clinton would tell the Palestinians at Camp David. The President’s advisor, Robert Malley, in a judicious and balanced analysis of the summit co-authored with Hussein Agha, repeated this remark: “Indeed, the Palestinians’ principal failing is that, from the beginning of the Camp David Summit onward, they were unable either to say yes to the American ideas or to present a cogent and specific counterproposal of their own.”²

Tactical shortcomings were not, of course, a Palestinian monopoly. Israel’s Prime Minister Ehud Barak was full of them. For example, he was too slow to grasp the centrality of the issue of Jerusalem in this conference, and hence was unprepared for the far-reaching concessions that were required, and his condescending attitude toward the Palestinian leader was anything but helpful.

Yet, it would be incorrect to dwell excessively on the tactical shortcomings of the parties during the summit as an explanation for the collapse of the Oslo process. It would also be wrong to address Camp David separately from the overall peace process; that is, independently of the negotiations that preceded the summit and that followed it up to the presentation of the Clinton Parameters on 23 December 2000 and later the Taba talks.

The collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was the result of misconceptions, of which none of the parties was free. It was a tragic, and so far irreconcilable, clash of ethos and an impossible political environment that desperately limited the maneuvering space of the parties.

Of course, as critics asserted, the conference at Camp David could have been better prepared, although it is not clear at all what is really meant by that. We made enormous progress through the secret channel in Stockholm between Abu Ala and myself. But the exposure of the channel destroyed any possibility for further progress. The channel stopped because

it was not producing anymore. From that moment on it became clear that Yasser Arafat's insistence that the summit be better prepared was a euphemism that meant that Israel should come closer to his positions.

I must admit, however, that Abu Ala came to me on the eve of Camp David with an initiative to renew the secret channel, this time in Cairo, and he advanced flexibilities he had been unwilling to show before, in order to increase the bait. I failed to convince Barak, who feared an erosion of his positions before the summit, while it later became clear that Abu Ala was not authorized to make those concessions, and his initiative was his way to recover the political ground he had by then lost in much of the Palestinian political family. "We need more time to prepare" was a legitimate Palestinian argument, but nothing was being done to facilitate the process of "preparation."

It is also true that the lack of trust between Barak and Arafat was not especially helpful. It is difficult to imagine a greater incompatibility than the one existing between the Israeli Prime minister, an intellectually arrogant, undoubtedly brilliant general, totally blind to cultural nuances, and always convinced that he possessed the powerful Cartesian logic that would surely convince his interlocutor of the invalidity of his own arguments, on one hand, and Arafat, a mythological leader who, to this day, continues to embody the general will of his people, but who, at the same time, is full of personal complexes and is incapable, or pretending to be incapable, of conducting a fluid dialogue. He would only speak in slogans, catchwords, Islamic metaphors; and he left his interlocutor with the frustrating feeling that, whatever concessions he might be willing to make, he was still owed much more. At no point throughout the entire process as it unfolded after Oslo, not even in the best days that now Arafat claims to miss—those he shared with Yitzhak Rabin, whom he says was his friend—did Arafat convey in private or in public a positive message of hope, or a promise of friendship and cooperation with the co-signatories of the Oslo accords. He never really tried to advance a positive ethos for the Palestinian Authority in the areas of development, education, and the image of the future Palestinian society.

In fact, he did not cease to nurture his image as a "conqueror," as a modern Salah-A-Din or Umar-el-Qutab who would liberate Jerusalem from the infidels. In a long meeting I had with him in Nablus on 25 June 2000, which was a fortnight before Camp David, he was careful to remind me, when we moved our conversation to the chapter on Jerusalem, of the 'Umar Treaty' of 638 CE, signed between the Khalif Umar al-Qutab, the conqueror of Jerusalem, and the Byzantine leader Sophronius, where the

conditions for the capitulation of the Christians included a prohibition against Jews to live in Jerusalem.

The expression “peace of the brave” used *ad nauseam* by Arafat, never convinced even Rabin that the commitments Arafat assumed were indeed irrevocable. Notwithstanding his commitment to renounce violence, he has never really relinquished the terror card. It was precisely that card that politically destroyed Rabin before he was destroyed physically by a Jewish fanatic motivated by a most dangerous Jewish political theology—the direct result of our corrupting philosophy of settlements in the territories. It was that same terror card that also brought about the defeat of Peres and the ascendancy of Netanyahu. Arafat excelled in destroying his peace partners and directly enhanced the chances of the hard right in Israel. The incompatibilities between the leaders, however, were not only a question of legitimate differences in character. They were fed by major fallacies and inconsistencies produced by the Oslo process itself.

The misconceptions of the peacemakers becomes clear in retrospect. Oslo created in Israel the notion that we had now entered with our Palestinian partners into a post-Westphalian phase, where we had overcome the constraints of our respective mythologies, religious conflicts, and conflicting memories. From that point, it was going to be a banal and mundane process of “land for peace” that would be settled in a civilized way, and through a reasonable compromise between two political entities, both inherently interested in bilateral and regional stability.

The creation of the PA, however, did not eliminate or dilute the essence of the Palestinian national movement as a revolutionary movement, which, if the political track failed to vindicate its aspirations, would again resort to armed struggle and a policy of regional instability. The neo-colonialist fallacy that economic development can be a substitute for political dreams was a Peres obsession that could not work. I never saw a picture of Jean Monnet on Arafat’s desk. I did, however, see pictures of the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem all over the place.

Nonetheless, Camp David did not fail because of territory. Arafat himself, notwithstanding the complaints about the humiliating Israeli proposals of a state built by fragmented Bantustans, deposited with President Clinton at Camp David his agreement to border modifications of between eight to ten percent: “And, as to the swaps,” he said to the president, “I trust you and I accept your judgment; you decide.” Arafat later reversed his position, but this moment at the summit clearly reflected Arafat’s view that the peace process was not a mundane bargaining over “real estate.”

The process fell victim to Israel's understanding that Oslo did not mean that a process was now unleashed that could culminate in a withdrawal to the 1967 lines, the clear and unambiguous division of Jerusalem and an implementation of the right of return of the Palestinian refugees. Constructive ambiguity facilitated an agreement in Oslo at the price of creating irreconcilable misconceptions with regard to the final settlement.

Peace with the Arab states is a strictly political undertaking based on the restitution of territory. In contrast, peacemaking with the Palestinians is an attempt to break the genetic code of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and perhaps even of the Jewish-Muslim dispute, by touching upon religious and historical certificates of ownership. Arafat clearly refused to be the first and only Arab leader to recognize the unique historical and religious roots of the bond Jews had to their millenarian homeland and to their holy shrines. Refugee-ism and Islamic values, more than land and real estate, were the obstacles that prevented an agreement at Camp David and at Taba.

Throughout, Arafat perceived himself as a warrior engaged in a mythological campaign of moral decision against a state "born in sin," which had to be forced to acknowledge Palestinian justice by opening a wide window to the implementation of the Palestinian refugees' right of return.

"How many refugees do you intend to ask that should return?" Nabil Shaath was asked by President Clinton during the negotiations on refugees at Camp David. Shaath's answer was, "Between ten and twenty percent of the total number." "Do you really expect Israel to accept between 400 and 800,000 refugees? Is this the agreement you expect them to subscribe to?" was the President's reaction. "We insist on the right of every refugee to go back to his home," was Akram Haniyya's response. Haniyya, the Editor of *al-Ayyam*, the Palestinian Authority's official newspaper, later published a series of articles in which he elaborated the Palestinian rationale on refugees at Camp David and the reason why Israel refused to endorse it: "At Camp David we intended to make the Israelis face the tribunal of History, face the victim, and their [own] crimes and sins. Israel wanted to silence forever the voice of the witnesses to the crime and erase the proofs of *al-Naqba*."

Some may say that this is a legitimate and—perhaps in the eyes of potential beholders—even a commendable attitude; but it was hardly conducive to a reasonable agreement. It only strengthened the Israelis' perception that Arafat was unable or unwilling to endorse the two-state solution, and—as Rob Malley and Hussein Agha were fair enough to admit—to assume the moral legitimacy for the existence of a Jewish state.³

The Oslo process bequeathed additional fallacies to the negotiators at Camp David and Taba. The incremental process left the nature of the final agreement wide open, at least in the perception of the Israelis, and hence encouraged their governments in what was, and continues to be, the most absurd, politically and morally corrupt march of folly that the State of Israel has ever embarked upon—the creation of a Bosniac map of settlements throughout the territories that narrowed the living space of the Palestinian people and destroyed beyond repair their faith in the peace process.

Amazing as it may sound, there is nothing in the letter of the Oslo accords that prevents the creation of settlements. The blame should be put, a key Palestinian personality recently commented to me, at the door of the Palestinian negotiators, who all came from Tunis and had no knowledge of, or sensibility to, the conditions on the ground. Local leaders, who had been brought up under the occupation, and the arrogance and agrarian hunger of the settlers would not have let this happen.

Loyal to the old archaic Zionist philosophy according to which the last kindergarten also defines the political border, the Israelis tried to influence the nature of the final agreement by a hectic policy of settlement expansion. The Palestinians responded with terrorism.

At a meeting in Lisbon prior to the summit, Clinton warned Barak that the summit, if it failed, “will kill Oslo.” But the truth of the matter was that Israelis and Palestinians had already jointly killed Oslo. Oslo was built to function under the sterile conditions of a laboratory, not real life. Conditioned by irresistible domestic constraints, every new Israeli government asked for a revision of the agreements signed by the previous government. The agreement on Hebron was Netanyahu’s version of Rabin’s Oslo-B, and Sharm el-Sheikh was Barak’s version of the Wye River Memorandum. All this was hardly conducive to the cultivation of trust between the parties.

The Barak government inserted its own dose of mistrust into Arafat’s mind by subscribing to the traditional Israeli structure of peacemaking, that of dealing with Arab states first and relegating the Palestinian problem to a secondary position. Barak, contrary to the advice of many of us, opted for a Syria-first strategy. And, when we came to serious negotiations with the Palestinians we had already withdrawn from Lebanon. “These are our disciples; we taught them and we financed them.” This is how Arafat referred to Lebanon’s Shi’ite militia Hizbullah in a conversation with me in Nablus on the morning of our pullout from Southern Lebanon. I could not fail to notice a sense of admiration and envy in the voice of the old warrior, a man still in uniform who viscerally despised the concept of negotiations.

Armed struggle was his element. The same evening and in the same city, Nablus, driven and inspired by the example set by the Hizbullah, Arafat would say to a grand gathering of the Fatah Youth: “We are fighting for our land and we are prepared to erase the peace process and restart the armed struggle.”

“I am a general who never lost a battle,” he told me a few hours later in the house of the mayor of Nablus, where he also rejected the possibility that anybody, even the President of the United States, would expect him to engage in negotiations. “I am a decision maker, not a negotiator,” he told me. In retrospect, I am not sure he was a decision maker either.

I have no doubt that Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon left a profound mark on Arafat’s mind. He felt humiliated and embarrassed that he should negotiate border modifications with us at a time when 500 guerrillas had forced Israel to withdraw to Lebanon’s international border. He carried this frustration to Camp David, and, once the summit failed to satisfy his aspirations, he legitimized and encouraged once again the resort to armed struggle. The Lebanonization of the struggle against Israel, he believed, would break the capacity of resistance of the Israeli. The lesson he drew from Israel’s Lebanon defeat was that the Israeli people were worn out and ridden with doubts regarding their own capacity to sustain casualties in a low intensity conflict. Seen from the perspective of the last two years and of the Palestinians’ appalling military and political defeat in this Intifada it would seem that Arafat was wrong once again.

Barak’s contribution to Arafat’s loss of confidence in the political process lay especially in his refusal to abide by his commitment to hand over the villages around Jerusalem to the Palestinians. Barak laid the blame on Arafat’s inability to prevent Palestinian violence on the *Naqba*’s anniversary in mid-May 2000. But the truth of the matter was that either Barak had made the promise in the first place only as a way to impress the Syrians to settle for a compromise before he switched to the Palestinian track; or that—and the two possibilities are not mutually exclusive—if the villages were handed over, the coalition would have simply collapsed before it had even reached the moment of truth of a final deal.

It can also be argued that the collapse of Oslo had much to do also with the fact that the document lacked internationally agreed mechanisms of implementation and monitoring. It was all based on the diminishing asset of mutual trust rather than on legitimate mechanisms of inspection to which the parties could resort to settle their differences. It was a major fallacy to believe that an incremental piecemeal process between the occupier and the occupied could be built on trust.

Clinton's warning to Barak that the failure of Camp David might lead to the death of Oslo should have been sent to Arafat's address as well. It is true that Arafat had been asking the Americans for more time to prepare the summit, but he wanted the meeting nonetheless. In fact, he had been pushing the Americans to solve all the issues. "No more limited deals," he kept saying to the President. And, as Akram Haniyya recalls in his articles, when I suggested to Arafat to postpone the negotiations on Jerusalem for two years, his answer was "not even for two hours."

It is then totally unfair to claim, as Rob Malley and Hussein Agha did in their *New York Review of Books* article, that Barak's all-or-nothing approach was a corridor leading either to an agreement or to confrontation. If this is true, the blame should clearly be shared with Arafat. But, the truth of the matter is that at key moments at Camp David, when it was clear that a final settlement was impossible to reach, both the Israelis and the Americans tried fall-back plans for interim or partial settlements that were rejected out of hand by the Palestinians.

To turn back to Camp David, one might say that it was the inability to grasp the complex relationship between the United States and Israel that cost Arafat dearly. By failing to put forward clear proposals, the Palestinians deprived the Americans of the instrument they felt they needed to further pressure the Israelis, and it led them to question both the seriousness of the Palestinians and their genuine desire for a deal. As the President repeatedly told Arafat during Camp David, he was not expecting him to agree with American or Israeli proposals, but he was counting on him to say something the President could take back to Barak to get him to move more. "I need something to tell him," he implored. "So far I have nothing."

Ultimately, the path of negotiation imagined by the Americans—get a position that was close to Israel's genuine bottom line, present it to the Palestinians, get a counterproposal from them, bring it back to the Israelis—took more than one wrong turn. It started without a real bottom line, for Barak was unable to make up his mind as to his bottom line, continued without a counterproposal, for Arafat would not budge, and ended without a deal.

Having spent a decade building a relationship with Washington, Arafat proved now incapable of using it when he needed it most. To make things worse, through the Intifada he employed a familiar tactic he had used throughout his career, "escape by running forward."

The Camp David proposals might not have been the ideal deal the Palestinians could have expected. But, to some among them, Arafat's rejectionism might have been reminiscent of an all too familiar pattern of behavior of the Palestinian leadership ever since it confronted the Zionist

movement. Nabil Amr, a minister in Arafat's cabinet, was courageous enough to spell out his criticism in an article in *al-Hayat al-Jadida*, a mouthpiece of the Palestinian Authority:

Didn't we dance when we heard of the failure of the Camp David talks? Didn't we destroy the pictures of President Clinton who so boldly presented us with proposals for a Palestinian state with border modifications? We are not being honest, for today, after two years of bloodshed we ask exactly that which we then rejected . . . How many times did we agree to compromises, which we later rejected in order to miss them later on? And we were never willing to draw the lessons from our behavior . . . And then, when the solution was no longer available we traveled the world in order to plead with the international community for what we had just rejected. But, then we learned the hard way that in the span of time between our rejection and our acceptance the world has changed and left us behind . . . We clearly failed in our meeting with the challenge of history.

There was much in our own performance that could and should have been improved, although I am aware that the best negotiator is the one that does not participate in the negotiations; Monday morning quarterback, they call this kind of negotiator in America.

But the major weakness in our peace enterprise was political and domestic. The lesson from Barak's experience—in a way it was also the case of Rabin—is that, however grandiose and enlightened the peace vision of a leader might be, he will be doomed if he is not sustained by careful domestic political organization. Of course, the Israeli peacemaker is always condemned to break national unity and split the nation if he wants to conclude a difficult agreement. Consensus may sometimes be the negation of leadership. The Israeli case proves that, tragically, war unites and peace divides; thus, much will always depend on the caliber of leadership. The leader should have a trivial mind, and be a hostage of the state apparatus and bureaucracy. But he should not ignore them either.

Inspiration alone is not sufficient for a bold peace enterprise. A sensible balance is always needed between inspiration and political maneuvering. A foreign policy needs to have domestic foundations. Barak was desperately awkward in putting together these vital foundations for peace. Inspiration in leadership does not mean ignoring *realpolitik*. An inspired leader does not have to be a political adventurer. Barak clearly failed to legitimize his policy in public opinion, and, no less importantly, within the polity and within the governmental apparatus.

He was totally incapable of co-opting the army bureaucracy to his peace endeavor. This was to have devastating effects in the early phases of the Intifada, when the army clearly interpreted freely the instructions of the government and responded with excessive force to Palestinian attacks, thus fuelling the cycle of violence. On the contrary, the army conducted its own independent war as if it were trying to supersede the frustrations it had accumulated during the First Intifada. This loose control of politicians over the army is a built-in weakness and an inconsistency in Israel's political system.

One should not, of course, underestimate the dilemma of Arafat either. For all our political difficulties, we Israelis never lost our confidence in our capacity to solve—by democratic means and through the established institutions—the inevitable internal earthquake that would follow a deeply divisive peace agreement. Arafat lacked such tools, nor did he ever try to develop them. Peace for him, if he were to respond to vital Israeli requirements, could have automatically meant civil war against Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Hence, he pushed for an impossible settlement that would allow him to preserve the unity of the entire Palestinian family. A settlement acceptable to Hamas is not, however, a settlement to which Israel can agree, just as a settlement to which the Israeli far right could subscribe is not the kind of peace deal the Palestinians can be expected to endorse.

Arafat was neither the initiator nor a planner of the Intifada, although he had encouraged the outburst of violence back in May 2000, and he had given more than one indication that he would welcome a return to the armed struggle if Camp David failed.⁴ But Arafat all too willingly seized upon the fortuitous eruption of a major crisis in order to escape his strategic predicament. An implicit green light was signaled by Arafat's choice to leave the country in the first days of the Intifada to attend a public rally in Tunisia and a seminar in Spain, making him conveniently unavailable to take command responsibility for the situation. Arafat's intuitive reaction to the eruption of violence was to use it in order to restore his international standing, energised vociferous Arab support, and reverse the political tables on Israel. In a crude sense, this strategy required a daily death toll; only thus could Arafat also stave off the then imminent peace package that President Clinton was planning to disclose by the end of September—a package along the lines of the Clinton Parameters of 23 December 2000 that deterred Arafat precisely because it might have brought him closer to the moment of decision and compromise that he could not stand up to.

Barak and Arafat shared a Napoleonic megalomania. Barak believed that he could make the world dance to his own particular brand of logic, and Arafat, as a strategist of all people, proved his failure again and again—he always pushed his luck to the point where he lost his achievements. Thus, what appeared to be a chance for a reasonable victory ultimately became a disgraceful defeat.

The Intifada's resort to armed struggle and suicidal terrorism was to have fatal consequences for the peace process, for it enhanced the drift to the right, and even to the extreme right, of Israel's public opinion without presenting the Israelis the political bait that was worth endorsing. The Hizbullah in Lebanon had a realistic political strategy: driving Israel out of Lebanon, something that the overwhelming majority of Israelis were eager to do anyway. What was the political strategy behind the Intifada? Arm-twisting? But where was this supposed to stop? "The end of Occupation" was a commendable slogan and a catchy battle cry, but hardly a precise strategy with a realistic chance of success. Without clear enunciation of concrete Palestinian demands, the Israeli public was unable to calculate the comparative costs and benefits of pursuing one course of action or another. The fall-back position was, and continues to be, to assume the worst about Palestinian intentions. Years into the Intifada, only twenty percent of the Israeli public had come to believe that a signed peace agreement would bring with it the end of violence and the end of conflict.

Throughout my conversations with Arafat, I was, time and again, struck by the degree to which he did not grasp the depth of the shift in Israeli politics and public opinion. In a meeting in Cairo four weeks before the elections in Israel he would still dismiss my warning that general elections under fire and suicidal terrorism would end up bringing the far right to power as sheer negotiating tactics. Deploring this chapter of the peace process, Yezid Sayigh summed it up:

The Israeli nationalist right would probably celebrate the collapse of the PA as heralding the ultimate victory of the Zionist project in Palestine, not least by clearing the way for final expansion and consolidation of the Jewish settlement in the West Bank and East Jerusalem (and secondarily Gaza). The Palestinians . . . would have thus missed the post-Cold War opportunity to make the transition to statehood, and would find themselves no closer to statehood than the Kurds. If this course of events were to occur, Arafat's misjudgment in Autumn 2000 would have been of historic proportions. At best, Arafat's choices since Autumn 2001 rank beside the two most important

strategic mistakes of his previous, long political career: confronting Syria in Lebanon in 1976, and siding with Saddam Hussein in 1990. On this occasion too, there is a price to pay, and it will take several years to recover, if the lessons are learned, by which time Arafat may no longer be leading the Palestinians.⁵

But Camp David was not really the deal the Palestinians could have accepted. The real lost opportunities came later on. The negotiations continued; more than 50 meetings between the parties and with the American mediator culminated on 23 December 2000 in a meeting in the Cabinet room adjacent to the Oval Office, where President Clinton presented his peace parameters to us. The parameters were not the arbitrary and sudden whim of a lame duck president. They represented a brilliantly devised point of equilibrium between the positions of the parties as they stood at that particular moment in the negotiations. The peace package consisted of the following principles:

- A Palestinian state on 97 percent of the West Bank and a safe passage to the West Bank, in the running of which Israel should not interfere, that would link the Gaza Strip, all of which, devoid of Israeli settlements, would be part of the Palestinian State. Additional assets within Israel—such as docks in the ports of Ashdod and Haifa—could be used by the Palestinians so as to wrap up a deal that for all practical purposes amounted to 100 percent of the territory. Needless to say, the Jordan Valley, the mythological strategic asset sanctified by generations of Israeli generals would be gradually handed over to full Palestinian sovereignty.
- Jerusalem would be divided to create two capitals, Jerusalem and Al-Quds, along ethnic lines. What is Jewish would be Israeli, what is Arab would be Palestinian.
- The Palestinians would have full and unconditional sovereignty on the Temple Mount that is the Haram el-Sharif. Israel would retain sovereignty of the Western Wall and a symbolic link to the Holy of Holies.
- With regard to refugees, it was stated that the Palestinians would have the right “to return to historical Palestine” but with “no explicit return to the State of Israel.” They could of course be admitted to Israel in limited numbers and on the basis of humanitarian considerations. They could also be settled in unlimited numbers not only within the Palestinian state, but also in those areas within Israel that

would be handed over to the Palestinians within the framework of land swaps. In addition, a comprehensive international mechanism of compensation and settlement was to be put in place.

- In matters of security, the President endorsed the Palestinians' rejection of the concept of a "demilitarized state" and proposed instead the concept of a "non militarized state," whose weaponry would have to be negotiated with Israel. A multinational force would be deployed along the Jordan Valley to replace the IDF. The President recognized the need of the Israeli Air Force to coordinate with the Palestinians the use of their airspace as well as the IDF's necessity to have, for a period of time, three advance warning stations inside what would become the Palestinian state.

Clinton presented his parameters as a "take it or leave it deal." "It is not even the ceiling," he said. "It is the roof." It was not a basis for further negotiations but a set of principles to be translated by the parties into a peace treaty. He also presented us with a deadline. He wanted an answer of yes or no by December 27.

The Israeli government met the deadline. In the midst of sweeping opposition on the part of the army—it was tantamount to a *coup d'état* that the Chief of Staff should have gone public to criticize the government's endorsement of the parameters as an existential threat to Israel—and strong reservations from the political opposition and public opinion, as well as being at the height of the continuing Palestinian Intifada, Israel's was a daring decision of a government of peace that stretched itself to the outer limit of its legitimacy in order to endorse positions our political opponents labeled as suicidal for Israel and as an affront to Jewish values and history.

But Arafat delayed. He refused to respond. As usual, he resumed his journeys across the world, as if he were the traveling emperor Adrian, in the hope of evading any decision. Another meeting with Mubarak, one more trip to Ben-Ali, another trip to Jordan, another meeting of the Arab foreign ministers, dozens of calls from world leaders, from the President of China to the Grand Duke of Luxembourg urged the Palestinian leader to seize this last opportunity, to grab the historical moment. The days went by. Clinton's presidency was fading away, the Intifada was running wild, the days of Barak's government were numbered, and still Arafat delayed. The phone calls continued to pour in from all corners of the earth, and ten days after the deadline, he still was not answering. Instead, he asked to come to Washington to see the president. There, at the White House,

in a typical Arafat ploy, he said to the President, "I accept your ideas," and then proceeded to tick off a number of reservations, each of which completely vitiated the ideas. He never formally said no, but his yes was a no. Clinton could see from the window of his Oval Office the swearing in stage for incoming president George W. Bush on Wisconsin Avenue, across from the White House. This was melancholic enough for a president fanatically in love with his job, but he still had to listen to Arafat's impudence, telling him that he still wanted to reach an agreement under Clinton's presidency.

I made clear to Arafat in our meeting in Cairo, a week later, that Israel was ready even at that late stage to negotiate, but only in order to translate the President's principles into an agreement, not in order to change the parameters. This was what he should have understood when he agreed to send his delegation to Taba.

The Taba talks were indeed practical and detailed. Maps were exchanged, and a serious attempt to engage was made by the two parties. It was the business-like spirit of the Stockholm talks being resuscitated. There were moments in Taba that we all believed that an agreement was indeed possible, that the differences could be bridged. But, mythologies apart, Taba did not allow an agreement because, for the Israelis, qualitative political time was a desperately diminishing asset, and because the Palestinians treated the parameters as non-committal and insisted on changing and challenging them on every point. For us the parameters represented the outer limits of our capacity for compromise as Israelis and as Jews. "The boss does not want an agreement," was Abu Ala's comment to my colleague Gilead Sher when the Palestinians refused to make use of the helicopter we put at their disposal in order to travel to Gaza to consult Arafat whether to rubricate an agreement or a Declaration of Principles on the basis of the outline of our talks. I will never be able to erase from my memory my feelings at Taba. Here, I wrote in my diary, an outline of a reasonable settlement is lying on the table. One would have to be blind so as not to understand that there were also the last days of the left in power maybe for many years to come. An Israeli team consisting of Yossi Sarid, Yossi Beilin, Amnon Shahak and, if I may, myself, cannot be replicated for years to come. In other words, if an agreement could not be reached, then there would be no agreement at all, and both Israelis and Palestinians would be thrown into the wilderness of blood and economic decline. Nevertheless, I did not succeed in discerning any sense of urgency or of missed opportunity among my Palestinian friends.

Zionism up to 1948 would have never functioned this way against what is always and inevitably an imperfect settlement. Zionism always functioned with its back against the wall, which is why it was always blessed with the capacity for pragmatic decision-making. It is a matter of tactic and a matter of ethos. The Zionist leadership, prior to 1948, looked for solutions, not for a deal that would respond to its own brand of justice. The Palestinian national movement, by contrast, has been more about vindication and justice than about a solution.

Is it possible that Arafat was someone who is capable of launching a process but is incapable of concluding it? Is it possible that all that he tried in Taba was to hook the new administration and create a sense of continuity with the Clinton ideas? This was another fatal miscalculation, for they all thought in the Arab world that Bush Jr. would be a replica of Bush senior. As it turned out, however, President Bush is an updated Reagan who advances his own Machiavellian view of international relations. Is it possible that Arafat, who claimed he dreamt of superseding all these interim agreements, was at the same time simply incapable psychologically to end the conflict? That he, whose whole life was characterized by ambiguities, double language, closing a door yet leaving it always half open, could simply not bring himself to locking for good the doors of this eternal conflict? Is it possible that the old guard of the Palestinian movement—which had spent a lifetime trading with the Palestinian tragedy in the international forums in a way that succeeded in building the case against the “wicked Israeli occupier” in the court of international public opinion so as to put Israel in the dock—was simply incapable of producing the transition to state and institution building, which was exactly the same kind of accusation made by Nabil Amr and Yezid Sayigh in their previously mentioned articles?

Seen from the internal logic of Palestinian history and refugee-ism, the loss of a fatherland, and long years of homelessness and deprivation of personal and national rights, the ethos of vindication is entirely understandable. “Peace is about stability not justice,” I used to say to my Palestinian interlocutors. I am not sure this sounded convincing to them. But the tragedy persists and the solution continues to elude them and us.

Societies and peoples condemn themselves to ruin when they fail to build a culture of fair compromise to settle conflicts. Civil wars, as well as wars between nations, are the outcome of the loss of the middle ground. With regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the principle of compromise is gone, the middle ground has been fatally wounded, and the so-called

peace camp in Israel has been severely diminished and morally undermined. After Taba, the two nations returned to the roots of the conflict. The Arafat-Sharon encounter was an exercise in the irony of history, a trip back on a time machine to the core of the conflict. From this point on, any sober analysis of the possible options for the future must lead to the conclusion that the time has come to design a new paradigm for the peace process.

The collapse of all the mechanisms of peacemaking between Israel and the Palestinians into waves of Islamic suicidal terrorism, on one hand, and Israel's dangerously incremental military responses, on the other, should also convince those who have so far resisted the conclusion that a settlement, if there is to be one, will have to be international.

A consensus for an international solution should be drawn from two major peace platforms that are not mutually exclusive—in fact, that are complementary—the Saudi Initiative and the Clinton Parameters. The latter do not contradict any of the principles laid down by the Saudi Crown Prince. Clinton's failure does not lie in the nature of his peace platform, but in the deficiencies of his international diplomacy. He was unable to rally the Arab governments to his peace enterprise, and he did not build a solid and effective international envelope with the Europeans and the Russians to internationally sustain and legitimize his peace deal.

It is precisely there that the Bush administration is in a unique position to perform better. America's unquestionable leadership in the War against Terror, and the growing concern of panic-stricken Arab governments about their stability—which is anyway the main rationale behind the Saudi strategy—in the wake of both 9/11, the Iraqi war, and the destabilizing effects of the Palestinian Intifada on the region offer President Bush a golden chance to build the international alliance for peace in the Middle East that his predecessor could not put together.

A lesson of the peace process thus far, however, is that principles that are too broad or too vague are no longer valid. Constructive ambiguity has outlived its usefulness. What is needed is a package of very precise and practical principles that will have to be endorsed as the internationally legitimate interpretation of what Resolution 242 means. An international peace conference will then supervise the negotiations between the parties on a detailed final-status agreement.

The proposed peace platform is this. Land for peace; territorial swaps to accommodate compact Israeli blocs of settlements on the one hand and the resettlement of Palestinian refugees on the other; a practical solution to the refugee problem that—as both the Clinton Parameters and the Saudi

Proposals indicate—does not assume a right of return, but requires the creation of an international fund for the resettlement and compensation of the refugees; two capitals in Jerusalem along ethnic lines; a non-militarized Palestinian state; and an end to conflict and finality of claims.

The current war between Israelis and Palestinians may produce no peace of the brave, but it can perhaps create the conditions for the peace of the exhausted. The insistence of Israel, and indeed of the international community, that profound institutional reforms be carried out in the Palestinian Authority is understandable and legitimate. But equally sensible is the Palestinian response that reforms and free elections are impossible “so long as the occupation continues.” Reforms and the end of occupation are entirely intertwined.

This should be the essence of the peace process from now on. The transition from the anarchic and corrupt Palestinian Authority to an orderly and transparent system needs to be accompanied by clear steps leading to a final settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. Palestinian independence and democratic reforms need to be shaped by the international community as one package.

For Ariel Sharon, the call for reforms is a comfortable pretext to avoid taking tough decisions on withdrawal and the dismantling of settlements, decisions his impossible coalition cannot survive. A national unity government would not perform better. National unity governments in Israel can make war—in the case of operation “Defensive Shield,” the war was overwhelmingly supported by the nation as a just war—but this support will disintegrate in the face of peace.

The truth of the matter is also that “occupation” has been throughout an alibi and an excuse for Arafat and his entourage not to undertake reforms. Despite widespread international concern, expressed mainly by the donor countries, about the corruption, lack of transparency and dictatorial methods of Arafat’s regime, the PA adamantly resisted any pressure for change.

Clearly the Intifada with all the disasters it brought upon the Palestinian people was encouraged by Arafat, not only as a way to put pressure on Israel to end the occupation, but also as a device to stave off the popular call for reform and to circumvent the frustration of the masses at the poor performance of the PA in practically every aspect of life.

A major fallacy of Oslo lay precisely in the fact that the accords contained no binding mechanisms that would lead the Palestinian people from a state of revolutionary struggle to orderly and democratic statehood. An orderly Palestinian polity is crucial if it is to meet Israel’s elementary

security requirements. But the Palestinian Authority is not only corrupt and inefficient; it has also become the umbrella, the camouflage, for a plethora of security establishments, armed militias, terrorist gangs, and Islamic fundamentalists bent on destroying any chance of peace and stability.

The only way out of the impasse is the establishment of an international mandate on the territories that should nurse the PA in its transition to democratic independence, real free elections, economic order, and a vertebrate security system. This mandate should operate along the lines of the international mandate that successfully came to its end recently in East Timor, following that province's declaration of independence.

For such a mandate to be put in place, a strict framework leading to peace based on withdrawal, the dismantling of settlements and a practical solution to the refugee problem that does not entail their "return" to the State of Israel needs to be agreed upon. The Clinton Parameters provide the most advanced and precise set of principles upon which a reasonable compromise with overwhelming international legitimacy can be articulated.

The role of the international mandate will not only be to supervise the reform of the Palestinian system, but also to facilitate and monitor the evacuation of territories, the dismantling of settlements, the resettlement of refugees in the Palestinian state and other vital issues pertaining to the consolidation of peace.

Twelve years after the Madrid Peace Conference launched the Middle East peace process, one cannot convene the parties for photo-ops or for delivering speeches about "visions of peace," however daring and promising these may sound. This land of prophets always "suffered" from an excess of visions and a short supply of mechanisms and conditions for their implementation. All the wheels have already been invented in this peace process. What the international community, led by the United States, needs to do now is to put them to work by coaxing and nursing the parties into accepting the inevitable.

After the war in Iraq, Arabs feel humiliated. Notwithstanding the clear differences between conditions of the Israeli-Palestinian situation and the threat from Saddam Hussein's regime, Arab leaders and the "Arab Street" have always wanted to see the international community, through the UN Security Council, impose tough resolutions on Israel. With Iraq, many must have felt they were being "raped," as some put it in the Arab media, by an America acquiescing to precisely such a resolution against an Arab state at a time when Israel was being given a free hand to suppress the Palestinian Intifada.

In a region where the leaders are mostly “pro-Western,” and the masses “anti-Western,” there is always a serious threat of popular unrest, which, left unchecked, could jeopardize the very survival of the moderate regimes. Saddam was not the first Arab leader to wrap his sins in the mantle of the Palestinian cause. But one does not have to embrace the cynical discourse that all the ills of the Arab world come from Israel’s occupation in order to accept that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a major cause of instability in the region and a convenient platform for mass hysteria throughout the Arab and Muslim world. Popular unrest may unleash real strategic upheavals. A political earthquake in Jordan is a far more serious threat to regional stability and to the prospects of an Israeli-Palestinian peace than that posed by Saddam Hussein’s regime.

The real test of America’s leadership then is to use the solution of the Iraqi problem as a catalyst for a wider effort to build a structure of peace and security in the Middle East as a whole, lest the region slides into a chaotic post-war landscape. Peace between Israel and the Palestinians needs to be a central pillar of such an edifice of regional stability.

The situation calls for assertive American leadership in building an international alliance for such an Israeli-Palestinian peace. America’s need for Atlantic solidarity and European support to make Iraq’s reconstruction effort possible is a constellation that enhances the necessity for such an alliance. America needs to move beyond its traditional role as a sponsor and mediator for bilateral negotiations. It must rather develop its own detailed proposal and then vigorously encourage the parties to accept and implement such an agreement.

Such an approach will not be out of tune with the will of the Israeli public. For instance, in a recent poll conducted by the Steinmetz Centre for Peace Research at Tel-Aviv University, some 67 percent of Israeli Jews supported an American effort to formulate a detailed peace agreement—not just a broad and hardly binding roadmap—and then recruit and lead an international alliance in an effort to encourage the parties into endorsing the deal.

If Israelis and Palestinians can be presented with a detailed final status agreement that would end the conflict and meet their most basic needs, it is highly likely that the two peoples will say “yes” and compel their leaders to do likewise.

The globalization of efforts in the war against terrorism and in curtailing the irresponsible behavior of rogue states is a promising reflection of an improved global order. The mobilization of international energies for conflict resolution needs to be another.

American leadership, in responding to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, gained the support of much of the global community. A similar embrace of American leadership would certainly follow a resolute peace initiative aimed at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The United States must move in this direction.⁶

NOTES

1. Unless stated otherwise, all quotations come from the author's personal diary, which he kept during his time as negotiator between 2000 and 2001.

2. Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, "Camp David and the Tragedy of Errors," in *The New York Review of Books*, 9 August 2001.

3. Agha and Malley, "Camp David . . .": "For all the talk about peace and reconciliation, most Palestinians were more resigned to the two-state solution than they were willing to embrace it; they were prepared to accept Israel's existence, but not its moral legitimacy."

4. Mamdouh Nofal, an advisor to Arafat, quoted him to this effect in the *Nouvel Observateur*, and his Minister of Posts and Communications, Imad Falluji, declared that "The Intifada against Israel was planned after the failed Camp David talks in July 2000, and the head of the Tanzim in the West Bank warned me and Yossi Beilin in August that if by 13 September an agreement was not reached, the Palestinians would resume the armed struggle."

5. Yezid Sayigh, "Arafat and the Anatomy of a Revolt," *Survival*, 43(3), Autumn 2001, 57.

6. Author's Note: This lecture was delivered when Mr. Arafat was still alive, hence some of the references to him in the present tense. It occurs to me that my view of Arafat as a major obstacle to peace, a view that was never too popular, is now being vindicated by the worldwide consensus that his death has created improved conditions for a credible reactivation of the peace process.