

Peace in Tatters:
Israel, Palestine and the Middle East

Yoram Meital*

In the summer of 2000, the cards of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were completely reshuffled. A brand-new game began. The ambitious attempt to resolve all outstanding issues between the parties at Camp David (11-25 July) had come to nothing, and violence, terror and incitement became the daily fare of the peoples dwelling in the disputed land. In both societies, mainstream and fringe alike succumbed to despair, rage and loathing. The Oslo political process, often referred to as “Oslo”, or the “peace process”, appeared to be bankrupt. This backslide into bloodshed raised many questions: What caused the Israeli-Palestinian “peace process” to collapse? How were the hegemonic narratives about the political process and the resumption of violence molded in both societies? How do the changes in U.S. policy in the Middle East affect the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? What conditions might help mend the tattered peace? Is it not too late for a two-state solution?

Peace in Tatters is the result of my attempt to understand this perplexing situation. The first part (“The Goal: an End to Conflict”) is devoted to the historicization of the political process from the 1948 War to the failed summit held by Ehud Barak, Yasser Arafat and Bill Clinton at Camp David. In this part, the emphasis is on the repercussions of agreements signed between Israel, Egypt and the U.S. at the end of the 1970s for the Israel-Arab conflict in general, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular. The launching of the Oslo process is described as a crossroads marked by both continuity and change. As regards continuity, a number of basic guidelines first raised in the Camp David Accords (17 September 1978) made their way into the Declaration of Principles (DOP - 13 September 1993). As regards change, the foremost development was mutual recognition by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and their adoption of the assumption that the conflict’s resolution would be based on partitioning the disputed land into two states. As in the 1978 Camp David blueprint, so in the DOP it was agreed that final status would be discussed only after a lengthy interim stage. Oslo’s architects hoped that the new dynamics would so alter relations between the two peoples as to allow the sides to make the far-reaching

compromises and take the risks necessary to seal a much desired peace. In the Middle East and beyond, expectations for the “peace process” skyrocketed. Today, more than seventeen years after the breakthrough of Oslo, it is all too clear that the sides managed to put in place a “process” reflecting numerous agreements and arrangements, but very little “peace”. In discussing the disparity between the “peace process” and the facts on the ground, I make two chief arguments. Firstly, the problematics of the Oslo blueprint itself and the simplistic way that the formulators sought not only to create something out of nothing – a “peace process” – but also politically and publicly to avoid dealing with the basic questions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Secondly, the internal political and national contexts in both Israeli and Palestinian society did and do exercise a decisive influence on the policies adopted by the leaders and their approach to the other side.

The Israeli and Palestinian leaders both attributed great weight to domestic political constraints, yet found it very difficult to appreciate the constraints on the other side. Nor did either side waste much energy on considering the effects of their deeds and declarations on the opposite camp and its leaders. While each side scrutinized the statements of the other with a fine toothcomb, the spokespeople of each did not bother to examine the impact of their own pronouncements on the other. In many instances, the assertions of the other side were cited piecemeal with little attention paid to the context in which they had been made. In principle, each side showed an inflated indulgence for all manner of scathing proclamations emanating from its own society, a measure of lenience that suddenly evaporated when it came to like remarks made in the opposite camp.

Since its failure, a good deal of material, articles and statements have addressed the Camp David Summit. It was undoubtedly an event of enormous import. A discussion of its implications comprises the lion’s share of this book. The chapter, “Camp David – The Great Charade”, examines the positions and measures taken by Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the months preceding the Camp David Summit (July 2000) and the course of the negotiations. In contrast to the common tendency to concentrate on results (i.e., the failed negotiations) and Arafat’s sole responsibility for these, I have tried to bring out the sequence of events on both sides prior to the decisive conclave. In particular, I looked at the effects in both arenas of internal,

political developments on the policy lines and stances espoused by the leaders with respect to a permanent settlement. I examined Barak's decision to embark on pivotal negotiations even though he had lost his Knesset majority, when the government "of all" that he had formed was left with only a handful of supporters. In discussing the path to the summit, I considered the lack of preparation in the months leading up to the negotiations. Its negative effects had palpable consequences at the final-status talks, primarily on the extremely complex issue of dividing sovereignty in Jerusalem and control of the Holy Sites. Not only did the delegations approach the most sensitive issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without any prior understandings, but both senior and junior negotiators were fuzzy about a whole range of final positions. I attempted, without any embellishment, to examine the "generous proposal" that Israel placed on the table, the response of the Palestinian negotiators and the way that the Americans convened and managed the summit. This review resulted in a totally different picture from that widely held, particularly in Israel and the U.S. It is my conclusion that the blueprint for final settlement proposed by Barak months in advance of and during the summit itself was based on faulty premises, and that the Clinton administration should not have convoked a crucial summit at this problematic juncture when they knew full well that the preparations were raw and the chances slim of bridging the gulf and burying the conflict once and for all. In addition, American management of the negotiating agenda and teamwork was disorganized and lacked the sort of imaginative thinking that might have spared unnecessary crises, most of which were predictable. The U.S. negotiators displayed a clear empathy for Barak and the political risks he was taking, and largely ignored the constraints of the Palestinian leadership. The bridging proposals presented by the Americans were closer to Israel's maximal positions than to the Palestinian minimal demands. At various stages during the summit, the Palestinian leadership, notably Arafat, failed to present counter ideas, leaving the impression that they were not ready for true compromise.

The collapse of the political process significantly shaped consensual opinions in Israeli and Palestinian societies regarding the responsibility for the failure of the final-status negotiations and the eruption of violence and terror. Chapters Six and Seven consider the construction of the hegemonic narratives about the causes of the severe deterioration, their media dissemination and their reception by various Israeli and

Palestinian groups. On both sides, a sense of emergency caused the populations to close ranks. As the acts of hostility continued, there seemed to be no way out and any real differences between Left and Right, religious and secular, the regime and its critics virtually vanished. Israel's dominant narrative, embraced to varying degrees across the political spectrum (with the exception of Arab and non-Zionist political parties), centered on the following arguments: at Camp David, Israel made the Palestinians a most generous, unprecedented offer for the resolution of final-status issues, including Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and most of the West Bank, and a Palestinian foothold in East Jerusalem. The negotiations collapsed once it became clear that Arafat and his aides were not interested in peace or in settling the conflict, but in arrangements inimical to the very existence of Israel as the state of the Jewish people. After failing to achieve their goals at the negotiating table, the Palestinians resorted to violence and terror in the belief that Israeli society would not be able to take the heat and that its leadership would have to back down from their legitimate positions. The renewal of bloodshed in September 2000 was an "existential war" on Israel that had been masterminded in advance by the PA. Arafat blatantly controlled the violence and terror against Israeli targets, civilian and military alike. This being the case, "there is no one to talk to and nothing to talk about". Only after the Palestinians elect a new, peace-seeking leadership will it be possible to resume the peace process.

In the public discourse on the Arab and Palestinian side, the dominant narrative as to the failure of final-status negotiations and the eruption of violence was totally different from Israel's. The Palestinians were presented as victims and their leadership showered with praise for standing fast against the intolerable dictates of Israel and the United States at Camp David. According to this version, there is no truth to the pervasive claim that it was Israel who came up with offers to resolve final-status issues and who displayed a readiness for far-reaching concessions both at Camp David and subsequent deliberations, while the Palestinians made no counter-proposals and in fact missed an opportunity for real peace. Barak's "generous offer" – it continues – was a mere attempt to force on the Palestinians conditions that were too remote from their minimal demands for settling the conflict. These are: the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip according to the 4 June 1967 borders; *al-Quds* is to be the recognized capital of the Palestinian

state, which will include the Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem and the *Haram al-Sharif* compound (the Temple Mount); and a just solution to the refugee problem (the 'Right of Return') on the basis of U.N. General Assembly Resolution No. 194. Only Israel's agreement in principle to these stipulations (the 'Rights') would have allowed the Palestinians to weigh minimal border modifications – based on an equivalent territorial “exchange” – or take into account Israel's demographic concerns with respect to the number of refugees it would permit to return to its jurisdiction. The proposal that Israel put on the table at Camp David was a “trap” to dupe the Palestinian leadership and obtain their consent to the establishment of a Palestinian entity unworthy of being called a viable, independent and sovereign state. Such a state would consist of semi-independent cantons, a patchwork of sovereign territories, at best connected by access roads and remaining under full Israeli control. For all intents and purposes, Palestinian acceptance of the security arrangements that Barak and his people sought to force on them would have stripped their independent, sovereign entity of all meaning as a state. The main goal of the Israeli negotiators at Camp David was not a serious search for a permanent settlement or a readiness for true compromise; it was a pretext to saddle their Palestinian counterparts with the responsibility for failing to reach an agreement, while taking cynical advantage of the United States and its president. The *al-Aqsa* intifada was the reaction of the Palestinian people with all its factions and organizations to the impossible situation that Israel sought to perpetuate in the occupied territories.

Israelis and Palestinians related to the dominant narrative it had cultivated on the failure of negotiations and the eruption of violence as if it were fact, brightly illuminating the irrefutable justice of its own stance. In the wake of Camp David, it was the vigorous opponents of the two-state solution who began to set the tone of the public discourse. These included individuals and groups who had striven to undermine the Oslo process from its inception. And they viewed its collapse as just reward for their toil; indeed, a sign from heaven. The stepped-up violence and sense of despair provided oppositionists with a golden opportunity to expound their arguments or to make do with a simple “we told you so”. Those who disagreed with the increasingly dominant narrative were to be heard only on the fringes of the public debate, their voices mostly drowned out in the flood of reports on the growing violence. The concerted embedment of the dominant narrative in each society

marginalized the discussion of the conflict's historical, political and diplomatic contexts.

Although the conclusions arising from this book are not overly encouraging, I believe that they contain important insights: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be settled by peaceful means. But this can only happen if there will be a Palestinian state based on the borders of 4 June 1967, as well as an agreed resolution of both the refugee problem and Palestinian sovereignty. For this fitting resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to come about, it must be preceded by critical Israeli and Arab public discussion of the contentious issues. Unless the basic questions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are met head-on, a durable peace cannot be achieved. This calls for a political and public discussion that has not even begun. Without a thorough revamping of rampant misconceptions, there is no chance of settling the conflict by peaceful means. The two sides still have a long way to go before they can reach calm, security and peace.

* Professor Yoram Meital is the Chairman of the Chaim Herzog Center for Middle East Studies and Diplomacy, and the past Chair of the Department of Middle East Studies, at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU). The excerpt is based on his book *Peace in Tatters: Israel, Palestine and the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007).