

## The Arab-Israeli peace process: badly wounded, not destroyed

Steven L. SPIEGEL

Since the Al Aksa Intifada began on 29 September 2000, many people have asked what happened between Israel and the Palestinians? In July, at Camp David, they seemed to be close to a comprehensive settlement. By October, they were in a near war. What went wrong? Was opposition leader Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount truly threatening to the Palestinians? Did the violence spin out of control? Was Camp David a mirage? Was the peace process itself a deception? Let's look at the record.

The Israelis and Palestinians came together as a consequence of the Oslo negotiations in 1993 because both sides needed each other. The Palestinians were involved in a hopeless Intifada; they could gain international recognition galore, but Israel was the only party that counted for providing them a state and the hopes of a new economy and a new life as well as relief from their abysmal conditions and a mini-war with Israel. On the other hand, the Israelis too were in a hopeless situation. Since 9 December 1987, they had been fighting a war with the Palestinians, and they could not stop the uprising against them.

The Madrid Conference of October 1991 had established a framework for discussions involving meetings in Washington, DC between an Israeli and non-Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) Palestinian teams, but these too went nowhere (seemingly fruitless talks also proceeded with Israel and Syria, Lebanon and Jordan respectively).

So Israel and the PLO came together at Oslo and eventually reached an agreement that reflected the facts on the ground. The extended Oslo process was an attempt to produce a five-year confidence-building, phased process. It reflected Israeli preferences for caution and circumspection. On the other hand, Israel had to pay a price for its inability to quash the Intifada. It recognized the PLO and the Palestinian national aspirations with the implication — though not the commitment — that a Palestinian state would eventually emerge from the agreement it was accepting.

However, once the process began, the parties discovered that it could include not only confidence-building measures but confidence-destroying actions as well. Sceptics on both sides did not accept the fundamental idea of a settlement. There were Israelis who did not trust the Palestinians and who rejected a process in which Israel would gradually withdraw from all or much of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. There were also Palestinians, particularly represented by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, who were not prepared to give up the objective of destroying Israel.

At critical moments, both sides delivered violence and lethal blows to the confidence-building process envisioned by the authors of the Oslo Agreement.

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In March 1994, an Israeli rightist killed twenty-nine Palestinians praying at a mosque in Hebron, and in November 1995 another killed Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who had by then become the critical Israeli partner of Yasser Arafat in efforts to advance peace. On the other hand, Palestinian opponents of both the peace process and of Arafat engaged in a series of suicide bombings between 1994 and 1996 which terrorized the Israeli populace, killed Israelis at a much higher rate than had been the case during the Intifada, and as a consequence served to disillusion many in Israel with the process itself.

In 1996 in response to terrorist incidents, the Israeli public elected Benjamin Netanyahu by the tiniest of margins over Shimon Peres. Netanyahu's scepticism concerning the Oslo process was well known but he ran on a platform of peace reached through security. Although Netanyahu became the first Likud Prime Minister to relinquish territory on the West Bank, his tough policies also served to disillusion Palestinians and other Arab states, especially because under Netanyahu's leadership the process slowed to a crawl. The Arab response was to limit the normalization process with Israel that had never recovered — even when Ehud Barak became Prime Minister in 1999.

The process of a series of interim agreements built into Oslo turned out to be deeply controversial. Many Israelis worried that they were giving up too much too soon. At various points, negotiations dragged on for months with many diplomatic crises along the way, leading to a variety of agreements, which were often reached only after intense acrimony that robbed them of the confidence-building service they should have performed.

- The first such agreement was the 4 May 1994 arrangement by which Israel withdrew from parts of Gaza and Jericho, an agreement which permitted Arafat to come to Gaza in June 1994;
- The Oslo II Accord in September 1995, which passed the Israeli Knesset by only one vote and which represented a plan for Israeli withdrawal from major towns on the West Bank and the temporary division of the West Bank into three types of areas: Zone A — Palestinian control, Zone B — Palestinian civilian control but Israeli security control, and Zone C — Israeli control;
- The Hebron Agreement of January 1997, which called for Israeli withdrawal from the most controversial and divided town of the West Bank;
- The October 1998 Wye River Agreement, which attempted to reinvigorate the process that was by then long stalled between Netanyahu and Arafat; and
- The Sharm el Sheikh Agreement of September 1999 with its Barak-inspired focus on a final status comprehensive settlement which set the stage for the Camp David meeting in July 2000.

The very process of attempting to settle these interim disputes served frequently to erode confidence on both sides. Palestinians saw a continued occupation, a substantial number of expanding Israeli settlements, an increase in the number of settlers, missed diplomatic deadlines, a declining economy (caused only in part by the series of closures imposed by successive Israeli governments in response to Palestinian terrorist attacks), a corrupt Palestinian regime that did not bring them prosperity or democracy, a tough and ungenerous Israeli negotiating stance in trade negotiations, and miserable lives seemingly unaided by the peace process. By 2000, according to polls most Palestinians saw themselves as worse off than they had been in 1993.

Israelis, for their part, saw the Palestinian Authority presiding over continuing violence, hostile rhetoric, a Palestinian educational system and a media devoted to incitement against them in an anti-Semitic atmosphere, and a Palestinian clergy deeply hostile to Israel, the lack of progress with other Arab states (including Egypt), and a Palestinian negotiating stance that seemed to indicate an unwillingness or inability to compromise. Indeed, many Israelis still thought by 2000 that the Palestinians would not accept a final settlement but rather that their true objective was the destruction of the State of Israel.

There were, of course, major achievements by the Oslo process. By mid-2000 Israel had withdrawn from the territories in which most Palestinians resided and therefore only ruled a small minority of Palestinians. For their part, the Palestinians had engaged with the United States and Israel in a process of security co-operation that had made the year and a half before the Al Aksa Intifada a period in which terrorism had almost terminated. Fewer Israelis were killed at the hands of Palestinians than at any time in over thirty-three years. Indeed, 1999 became a record year because two Israelis were killed by Palestinian terrorists — the lowest in Israel's history.

The surface represented a record of achievement, promise and potential, but the underlying misgivings on both sides were profound and even growing. One of the worst deficiencies of the Oslo process was that it was largely private. Negotiators, administrators and security officials might conduct productive — even amicable — relations, but these were not translated into public events. Thus the silent majorities in both societies remained confused — even sceptical. They did not see the camaraderie established between diplomats, soldiers and even businessmen, but rather the violence, hostile rhetoric and disappointment were more prominent to the public. The symbol of the Palestinians to many Israelis became the terrorists, or the transmission of harsh anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish rhetoric by the media, educators, politicians and the clergy. The symbol of Israel to most Palestinians became the humiliations of daily life under occupation from checkpoints to settlers.

Thus Camp David occurred in the wake of this contradictory and even schizophrenic process. Ehud Barak, himself sceptical of Oslo but unlike his predecessor strongly committed to the process, believed in a comprehensive approach in which the conflict itself would be ended. He feared that the gradual phases inherent in Oslo originally would lead to Israel reaching final status without any negotiating carrots left.

He was also concerned that the departure of President Clinton in January 2001 would leave him without an effective mediator with Arafat. Barak had never developed the relationship with the Palestinian leader which both Rabin and Peres had had. He was also prone to deal with negotiations at the highest level. Barak is not someone who delegates, and sought to conduct the negotiations himself as he had done earlier in the year with Syria.

Arafat, by contrast, preferred to have issues prepared and negotiations handled by underlings as had been done in the Oslo process itself. He worried that a meeting at Camp David would fail with explosive results. Arafat undercut his position by frequently threatening a Unilateral Declaration of Independence — feared by American and Israeli leaders as well as many Europeans and even Arabs as a possible trigger for Israeli-Palestinian war with the possibility of its spreading throughout the region.

Faced with Barak's entreaties and Arafat's threats, Clinton had little choice but to call a Camp David summit with the intention of a sweeping conflict-settling agreement. There were three possibilities at Camp David: a major breakthrough, a major breakdown, or some kind of interim accord that would move the process forward but not solve all issues remaining in conflict.

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At the meeting, committees met and issues were discussed, including security, borders, refugees, Jerusalem, and economic/structural factors such as water and economy. Much progress was made, but the parties stalled on the two critical issues (refugees and Jerusalem). On the one hand, this was the first time they had ever seriously addressed these issues, and that itself represented progress. On the other hand, a summit is almost never a proper occasion for discussing issues for the first time. Whatever the progress achieved, it was not enough and in retrospect the preparatory meetings were inadequate and the background work, especially by the Israelis and Palestinians, too primitive.

Because Barak was more forthcoming during the meeting, Clinton publicly blamed Arafat for the failure. While these accusations may have accurately reflected the progress of the meeting and were made in part to protect Barak in a deteriorating domestic political situation, it also weakened Arafat and left many doubts and criticisms in the Arab world about the even-handed role of the United States. To Arafat these concerns were intensified when he found that many European and even Arab leaders did not sympathize with his scepticism about the Camp David approach. Many urged him back to the negotiating table. Indeed, discussions continued behind the scenes in August and September to seek a resolution of the remaining outstanding issues at Camp David, and progress was being made. Expectations of another summit meeting to seal a deal were high.

However, in the two months following the end of the Camp David meeting, domestic pressures developed in both societies. Barak was further weakened as relentless criticism against him continued from the secular and religious right, and as his coalition continued to collapse. All engaged parties were fully aware that when the Knesset began its full session at the end of October, it might well call early elections. Arafat faced mounting frustration and impatience on the Palestinian side, which accelerated when the Palestine Council decided not to declare a state unilaterally on 13 September. The Palestinians believed they received no credit for this restraint from either Israel or the West. They were also unhappy that after Camp David Barak had cut down on fulfilling previous commitments such as the release of particular political prisoners and the initiation of a northern safe passage between Gaza and the West Bank. However understandable from an Israeli perspective, these actions intensified the frustration among Palestinians.

Into this unhappy caldron, poised between a possible breakthrough and chaos, the Israeli opposition leader, Ariel Sharon, suddenly decided to visit the Temple Mount with a large contingent of supporters of Israeli rights and sovereignty on this most critical of all plateaux in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Despite warnings of danger, the weakened Israeli Prime Minister felt he could not stop the opposition leader from visiting the Temple Mount. Sharon's action itself was in part a political ploy designed to upstage his Likud rival, Netanyahu. Barak, too, had no interest in the return of the former Prime Minister whose standing in the polls had been steadily rising.

On the Palestinian side, the pot boiled over the next day when worshipers at the Al Aksa mosque on the mount at Harem al Sheriff (Temple Mount) were encouraged by vituperative sermons to express their anger at Sharon's visit. When the Israeli police killed seven in the ensuing riots, the Al Aksa Intifada had begun.

Arafat intensified the violence by encouraging the nationalistic tone mixed with religious fervour that dominated Palestinian politics and media over the weeks that ensued.

Indeed, one dangerous and totally unanticipated impact of Camp David was to intensify the meshing of religious and nationalist factors in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Barak's discussion at Camp David of Jerusalem led to wild rumours and conspiracy theories throughout the Arab world that the Jews wished to take over Harem al Sheriff, destroy the mosques, rebuild the Jewish Temple destroyed 2000 years ago, and to sacrifice Muslim rights. Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount seemed to confirm

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Jewish imperial designs. The Prime Minister's curious suggestion (later withdrawn) that a synagogue be built on the Mount further added to the confusion. The fact that these fears were fantasy made them no less real to many Palestinians who thought they were preventing the Jews from destroying their holy rights in Jerusalem. Arafat did nothing to reassure his people. The Barak government also failed after Camp David to provide assurances to the Palestinians because of its own domestic political pressures (assurances to the

Palestinians might have been used against it by the Israeli right), and because one of the Barak government's weaknesses has been its difficulties in explaining its positions both at home and abroad.

Arafat for his part chose to ride the tiger rather than seek an end to the violence. Lacking the courage and the skill to confront the mob, he sought to manipulate the crisis to bolster his domestic position. Attempting to combine violence and negotiations is his favourite mode of operation. He had tried this approach in Jordan in 1970 and in Lebanon in the early 1980s when he had similarly achieved control, only to overreach and lose badly. He retained his position as symbol of the Palestinian cause, but Camp David had also weakened him because he appeared unable to produce positive results for the Palestinians, even as Clinton was blaming him for its failure. Arafat now understood more clearly than ever the limits of what the Palestinians could expect from Israel in a final status agreement. Fantasies and dreams were now confronted by the pressure of reality, and Arafat seems to have feared retribution from his opponents at home more than the uncertain consequences of violence. Instead, he sought to wait out the crisis until new international developments or moves by Israel or the United States would enable him to claim some gains as the excuse for an end of the uprising. Yet for Israelis, any evidence that violence pays would be a serious blow indeed.

### *Where do we go from here?*

First, we must review the lessons of Oslo very carefully. It is not the agreements themselves that were flawed, but their implementation. Missed deadlines, expansion of settlements, continued violence, the incitement inherent in Palestinian media and education against Israel all produced an atmosphere in which this explosion could occur. Compliance with the Oslo agreements and with present and future agreements will have to be monitored more carefully. When Palestinians smuggle into their territory more guns than is acceptable under agreements or increase the number of policemen beyond those who have been permitted, these violations cannot be allowed to stand indefinitely. Nor can the expansion of Israeli settlements or the number of settlers. Agreements cannot work if fundamental portions of signed documents are ignored. Even violations of the spirit rather than the letter of agreements clearly can have a lethal effect.

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Second, violence must end as part of a package. It is inadequate only to conclude a simple cease-fire that likely will not be adhered to in any case, as we have seen in violated agreements since the crisis began on 29 September. Rather, in the short term we should have a more ambitious goal. We need a reciprocal set of measures that involve complying with past agreements, thereby effectively leading to a new cycle of confidence building. Unilateral actions, especially by the stronger party, Israel, may result in reversing the escalation of the Al Aksa Intifada if they are quickly matched by comparable confidence-building steps by the Palestinians.

Third, the violence must end by an act that provides hope for both sides. Thus, although the search for the comprehensive type of accord embodied by Camp David must continue, the final status package is difficult indeed to achieve, especially because of Barak's justifiable insistence on an end of conflict clause. Unfortunately, most likely it will be necessary to go back to interim arrangements on the way to comprehensiveness if the process is to be revised. Both peoples must have a sign that the process is back on track, and therefore even routine confidence-building measures are more important than ever.

The pursuit of the following four principles is therefore essential to de-escalation:

- commitment to compliance with all past agreements;
- some kind of moratorium on violence, either unilaterally initiated or a consequence of parallel actions;
- confidence-building measures and even interim steps during the months while a comprehensive agreement is being negotiated; and
- greater attention to informing and educating 'the street' on both sides.

If these four policies are pursued, it is still not too late to reverse course and salvage the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. Each party has major and fundamental misperceptions of the other; the process described here would work to convince the many sceptics on both sides that their counterpart does deeply want a settlement. Indeed, the prospects of success are enhanced because both parties are so clearly interlocked that they have no viable alternatives. Without the peace process, the Palestinians will never reach independence or rid themselves of the Israeli military occupation. Without the process, the Israelis will be doomed to constant conflicts. They have other dangers looming: threat of weapons of mass destruction in the region, deterioration of several Arab societies with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the constant danger of Arab terrorism. The best means to thwart all of these activities is to move on the peace process.

As the current crisis illustrates only too vividly, the vital interest of both sides is no guarantee of success — but it is a guarantee that they will not be able to avoid negotiations indefinitely. The sooner the four principles indicated above are adopted, the sooner a successful peace process will resume. The parties will then be able together to seek to repair the damage which the Al Aksa Intifada precipitated.