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Feature

Israelis & Palestinians: What Went Wrong?

By [Amos Elon](#)

1.

In a letter he wrote shortly before his death in 1904, at the early age of forty-four, Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, admonished his successor: "*Macht keine Dummheiten während ich tot bin.*" (Don't make any stupid mistakes while I'm dead.) It was a tongue-in-cheek remark and I am citing it only because of all other nineteenth-century attempts to found new nation-states, Herzl's was undoubtedly the most unusual and certainly one of the most difficult. If there was ever a national project which because of its complexity and uncertainty of success could ill-afford *Dummheiten*, it was Herzl's.



Zionism was a national project unlike any other in Europe or overseas. It involved colonizing without a mother country and without the support of state power. A difficult task, to say the least, in an arid country without natural resources, without financial attractions. One of Herzl's friends asked Cecil Rhodes, the great British imperialist, for his advice. Rhodes answered: "Tell Dr. Herzl to put money in his pocket." Herzl scarcely had any money. "The

secret I keep from everybody," he wrote, "is the fact that I am at the head only of a movement of beggars and fools" (*Schnorrer und Narren*). The rich, with very few exceptions, opposed his scheme. The early settlers were mostly penniless idealists, social anarchists, Narodniks, practicing a bizarre "religion of hard labor." Ninety percent of those who arrived in Palestine between 1904 and 1914 returned to Europe or wandered on to America.

Other nationalisms aimed at liberating subjugated peoples who spoke the same language and lived in the same territory. The Zionists, by contrast, called on Jews living in dozens of countries, speaking dozens of different languages, to settle far away in a remote, neglected province of the Ottoman Empire, where their ancestors had lived thousands of years before but which was now inhabited by another people with their own language and religion, a people—moreover—in the first throes of their own national revival and, for this reason, opposed to the Jewish project as a dangerous intrusion.

One of Herzl's closest associates is said to have come running to him one day, exclaiming: "But there are Arabs in Palestine! I didn't know that!" The story may well be apocryphal but it sums up, as such stories often do, the central facts of the case. In his answer, if there was any, Herzl would not have made an appeal to "historical rights," as many others did and still do to this day. He didn't believe in "historical rights" and he was too well informed not to know the damage that had been done by the quest for such rights during the nineteenth century by Germans, French, and Austrians, as well as in the Balkans, to name only a few examples. But he had an almost uncanny premonition of the dark period ahead. He was sure there were powerful historical currents that would justify the Zionist cause, a confidence that was fully vindicated by later events.

With so many seemingly insurmountable difficulties, it is remarkable how few stupid errors the Zionist leaders made. Fifty years after Herzl's death in 1904 they were still rare and the damage they caused was not fatal or irreparable. The Zionist project was led by sober men, experienced in the ways of Europe and the world,

unwilling to take undue risks; with the exception of a handful, whom Chaim Weizmann, the eminently rational Zionist leader in the interwar years, called disparagingly "our own D'Annunzios," they were reluctant to overplay their hand. They realized that they were conducting an unusual enterprise which in some ways ran counter to the basic trend of world events. Confronted with a mainly hostile Arab population, they wracked their brains to come up with compromises, binational solutions, and partition plans, even when they were damaging to the Zionists, as with several proposals for partition mooted over the years, which they accepted but the Arabs declined.

When you look at the maps outlining these partition plans in the 1930s and 1940s, with their contorted borderlines, narrow corridors, and British or international enclaves—the last was the UN partition resolution of 1947—you get the impression of two antagonists locked in a deadly embrace. By 1948, the British threw up their hands and quit the scene. But when, on the day they finally sailed away, the Jews declared an independent state in their part of the country, it was readily recognized by most nations, after a while even by Britain. Israel was admired for successfully defeating a combined attack by the regular armies of three neighboring Arab states.

The new state was still led by the same cautious leaders, though they were getting older. Their practical frame of mind made these men recognize their limits. They were not easily intoxicated by the recent victory of their ragged army. They usually knew the difference between force and power. The then prime minister David Ben-Gurion has since been accused of further exacerbating the Palestinian tragedy during the war—with fateful consequences later on—by authorizing his generals to expel perhaps 100,000 innocent villagers and townspeople, in addition to the approximately 500,000 who had fled the battle zones earlier during the war to seek refuge in the West Bank and the neighboring Arab countries.

And yet Ben-Gurion can hardly be faulted for his caution after the war. He firmly resisted the urgings of brash, young generals to seize the rest of the country, later known as the West Bank, which made up

about 22 percent of the former Palestine, including the Old City of Jerusalem with its holy places. What is now the West Bank had been annexed by the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan according to a tacit agreement with the Jewish state. The prime minister had reason to hope at that time that a formal peace treaty would now become possible with Abdullah, the Jordanian king, with whom he had remained in discreet contact throughout the war. Ben-Gurion preferred legitimacy to real estate, even if that real estate included the Wailing Wall and other historical and sacred sites. It was a memorable decision, in the tradition of some of the wisest nineteenth-century European statesmen.

His caution did not lead to peace. The Jordanian king was assassinated by a religious fanatic. But nevertheless it paid off. Postwar Europe was guilt-ridden and contrite over the anti-Semitism of its past. For two decades, support for Israel became virtually a matter of piety in Europe. Except in Britain, the 1948 armistice lines were widely regarded in Europe and America as sacrosanct, much like the post-war partition of Europe between the Western powers and the Soviet Union. The Arabs, of course, rejected them. But it is instructive to compare attitudes in the West toward Israel's post-1948 borders with attitudes thirty years later to Israel's de facto borders following the 1967 war. Not even Stalin, during his last years of anti-Semitic paranoia, suggested that Israel withdraw from the 1949 armistice lines to the much narrower confines of the original UN partition plan. Nor did Stalin's successors in the Kremlin.

The Fifties and Sixties were the age of decolonization. Stalin and his successors endorsed nearly all anticolonial movements (except, of course, within their own far-flung Asian and European empire). They denounced Israel as a lackey of American capitalism but not as a colonialist power. Many of the newly independent, former colonial peoples favored close relations with Israel even as they condemned other settler states like Kenya, South Africa, or Algeria. The far left in Italy and France was by and large free of the anti-Israel rhetoric that became familiar after 1967. Enrico Berlinguer, the Italian Communist leader, said that Israel was a special case. In a just and rational world,

he said, it might have made more "sense" and would have even been more "just" if Israel had been established, say, in Bavaria, or in East Prussia, as Lord Moyne, the British war cabinet minister had suggested, mainly for the sake of argument. Alas, Berlinguer added, we are not living in a wholly rational world.

The establishment of Israel was widely recognized at the time as perhaps the inevitable, even legitimate, result of a war that the Jews had neither started nor provoked; above all it was seen as a legitimate haven for Holocaust survivors and DPs who, in most cases, refused to go back to Poland or Germany. Having been rejected in their former homelands, many of them wanted to go to Israel and only to Israel. The resettlement of more than 600,000 Palestinian refugees was seen as a primarily humanitarian task, not as a political strategy. (Some had been expelled by Israel; most had fled their villages, as villagers in battle zones often do, and had sought temporary refuge in the Arab countries.) Israel was expected to assume much of the responsibility for their future, physically and financially, in the event of peace, and rightly so; after all, the Palestinians were not responsible for the crimes of Europe, but in the end they were punished for these crimes.

The neighboring Arab countries were expected to help and to absorb Palestinian refugees. Many in the West held them at least partly responsible for the consequences of a war they had launched in 1948 to undo a UN resolution. Americans, Europeans—and even the Soviet Union—urged the Arab countries to make peace with Israel on the basis of the postwar territorial status quo. In the UN Security Council, the American delegate, Warren Austin, pounded the table, saying the American government believed that it was high time for the Jews and the Arabs to get together and finally resolve their problems in a truly Christian spirit.

2.

The 1967 war was the great watershed. It interrupted a decade of gradual détente between Israel and Egypt, which had raised hopes that the conflict between Israel and the Arabs might be resolved, at least partially. Though the Suez Canal remained closed to Israeli

ships, they could, after 1956, move freely through the Straits of Tiran. Trade with the Far East and oil from the Iranian oil fields flowed freely to the southernmost Israeli port of Elath. Israel was at first praised in the West for scoring a spectacular victory in a war largely provoked by the bizarre miscalculations of the Egyptian and Syrian rulers, partly also by a clumsy Soviet diplomat who encouraged Egypt and Syria to threaten Israel and who soon afterward disappeared, perhaps in the gulag. (I remember chatting with a German military attaché at a party who pressed my hand and barely let go of it, saying, "This was just as Field Marshal Rommel would have done if he had had his way....") We now know that it was a Pyrrhic victory. The war changed not only Israel's position in the region, but even more so its self-image. Israel, which, in Isaiah Berlin's words, had always had "more history than geography," now suddenly had both. For the first time, at least in theory, it had enough territory to exchange for peace.

David Ben-Gurion was the only leading figure in the political elite who broke the general euphoria by suggesting that Israel withdraw immediately, if need be unilaterally, from all occupied territories. As he had in 1948, Ben-Gurion flatly opposed any attempts to permanently occupy the West Bank. But Ben-Gurion was old and retired and politically isolated. He had bitterly quarreled with the ruling Labor Party. Yigal Allon, the same young general who in 1948 had urged him to complete, as he put it, the "liberation" of the rest of the country, was now a prominent cabinet minister competing for the premiership with Moshe Dayan, another former general. Allon, though he spoke vaguely of the need to allow the Palestinians a state of their own, drew up a plan of settlements and annexations on the West Bank that would have left the Palestinians little more than two enclaves in the Samarian and Judean mountains, surrounded by Israeli military bases and proposed settlements. They would have no political foothold in Jerusalem. The so-called Allon Plan grew incrementally over the years as the political deadlock continued; it embraced more and more territory to be settled and annexed by Israel.

Dayan's plans were more ambiguous but, in effect, far more ambitious. He was the first top-level secular politician whose rhetoric

was loaded with suggestive biblical imagery: "We've returned to Shilo [a house of worship in the Bronze Age]; we've returned to Anathot [the prophet Isaiah's birthplace] never to part from them again," etc., etc. Dayan was the adored victor in a glorious war and, for some years, perhaps the most famous Jew since Jesus Christ. It was, I think, at his urging that the war was retrospectively named after the Six Days of Creation. Right-wing and religious fundamentalists made the most of the victory and endowed the Six-Day War with a metaphysical, pseudo-messianic aura. They pushed for the formal annexation immediately of all "liberated areas." At that time, they were still a relatively small minority.

The race between the two secular ex-generals for the premiership was more ominous, with fatal consequences to this day. Both Allon and Dayan were curiously self-centered, as politicians often are, and blind to the Palestinian presence in the region. They dismissed the aspirations of over a million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as of limited political importance. They had no intention to offer them Israeli citizenship. Some 300,000 Palestinians already lived in Israel proper, increasingly embittered by their status as second-class citizens. The Jewish population in 1967 was 2.7 million; the combined Arab population west of the river Jordan was 1.3 million. It was as though France had decided in 1938 to absorb as many as 20 million restive, potentially subversive Germans within borders that were surrounded, as Israel was, by more than a hundred million of their hostile, heavily armed co-nationals. Today, thirty-five years later, 4.1 million Palestinians live between the river Jordan and the sea (3.1 million in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and 1 million Palestinians in Israel proper.) Despite heavy Jewish immigration since 1967 there are still only some 5 million Jews, a ratio of only 1.2 to 1. Higher Palestinian birthrates are certain to assure an absolute Palestinian majority within ten or fifteen years.

Cabinet sessions in Israel are always long and verbose affairs but never as long and frequent as they were in the summer of 1967. The ministers deliberated on what to do after the great victory. The crucial session, on the status of the occupied West Bank, began on a Sunday

in mid-June` and lasted, with brief interruptions for food and sleep, until the following Wednesday. The decision finally made was—not to decide. In the absence of a decision, Dayan, by now a national demigod, Allon, and assorted right-wing and religious fundamentalist militants and squatters were able to successfully establish very dubious facts on the ground —settlements and so-called *heachsujot* (outpost positions) that multiplied over the years through formal and semi-informal arrangements. Squatters were gradually legalized, lavishly subsidized, and eventually hailed as national heroes. It was said of the British Empire that it was born in a fit of absentmindedness. The Israeli colonial intrusion into the West Bank came into being under similar shadowy circumstances. Few people took it seriously at first. Some deluded themselves that it was bound to be temporary. Those responsible for it pursued it consistently. They included a few ministers who believed that it might even induce the Arabs to sue for peace sooner rather than later, before too many "irrevocable" facts were established on the ground.

An ostensibly dovish Labor minister of housing—a declared opponent of the settlement project who nevertheless very generously subsidized it— cynically remarked that after the settlements were evacuated, as he was certain they would be, the United States would compensate Israel at a rate of one dollar for every lira spent on it in vain. The few who protested the settlements on political or demographic grounds were ignored. They were no match for the emerging coalition of religious and political fundamentalists. The Knesset never voted on the settlement project. The settlements were at first financed mostly through nongovernmental agencies, the United Jewish Appeal, the Jewish Agency, and the National Jewish Fund. The US government went through the motions of mildly protesting the settlement project. It took none of the legal and other steps it might have taken to stop the flow of tax-exempt contributions to the UJA or JNF that financed the settlements on land confiscated for "security" reasons from its Palestinian owners. For all practical purposes, the United States served as a ready partner in the settlement project. The National Coalition cabinet, which was slapped together hastily on the eve of the 1967 war, remained in power long after. It was presided over at first by Levi Eshkol, a weak prime minister who

died soon after the war and was succeeded by the hard-line Golda Meir, famous for her smug maternalism, and for saying, "Who are the Palestinians? I am a Palestinian."

The government informed the United States that Israel was ready to withdraw from occupied Egyptian and Syrian territory in return for peace; but it explicitly excluded withdrawal from the West Bank or Gaza Strip. No evidence has turned up so far that American diplomats actually sounded out Cairo and Damascus about a deal based on Israeli withdrawal. An attempt, a few years ago, by *The New York Review of Books* to induce the US National Archives to release diplomatic documents pertinent to these exchanges under the Freedom of Information Act produced no results. Not a single US cable, report, or verbal communication turned up to indicate that in the summer of 1967 an attempt was made by the US to begin a peace process. We can only speculate on the reasons for US failure to do so. Apart from being happy, apparently, that Israel had humiliated the Soviet Union's main clients in the region, the US was in no hurry to end the Arab–Israeli conflict. The Arab–Israeli War was becoming a proxy conflict between the superpowers, a testing ground for their hardware. The Suez Canal remained conveniently blocked. At the height of the Vietnam War, the US, under Lyndon Johnson, might have had good reasons to keep it closed as long as possible and force Soviet supply ships to North Vietnam to take the long route around Africa.

Soon afterward, at a summit meeting in Khartoum, the Arab countries announced the "Three no's"—no to recognizing, negotiating with, or making peace with Israel. The ensuing stalemate lasted several years. An Arab-Israeli writer, with something like *Schadenfreude*, borrowed an Oriental image to describe the Israeli dilemma: "Instead of stepping on the snake that threatened them, they merely swallowed it," he wrote. "Now they have to live with it, or die with it." A dilemma, by definition, is a conflict between equally undesirable alternatives. But was this really the conflict facing Israel? We now know that it wasn't. Peace was a distinct possibility—with the Palestinians as early as the summer of 1967, with Jordan and

Egypt in 1971 and 1972. Soon after the 1967 war, two senior Israeli intelligence officers—one was David Kimche, who later served as deputy director of Mossad and director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry —interviewed prominent Palestinian civic and political leaders throughout the West Bank, including intellectuals, notables, mayors, and religious leaders. He reported that most of them said they were ready to establish a demilitarized Palestinian state on the West Bank that would sign a separate peace with Israel. The PLO at the time was still a fairly marginal group.

Kimche's report, as far as we know, was shelved by Dayan. It was never submitted to the cabinet. In the hubris of the first few months following the war, even a tentative effort to explore this possibility would likely have been rejected by the cabinet. Dayan believed that as long as the natives were treated kindly and decently—at first they were—it would be possible to maintain the status quo on the West Bank and in Gaza for generations. The Palestinians were still remarkably docile; they had allowed the West Bank to be conquered in a few hours without firing a single shot. Dayan—and nearly the entire political and military establishment—were convinced that not only the Palestinians but also Egypt and Syria would be unable to present a military threat for decades. Dayan's opinion of the Arab armies was reflected during a visit to Vietnam. Asked by General Westmoreland how to win in war, Dayan is said to have responded: "First of all, you pick the Arabs as your enemy." He told me a few weeks after the war: "What is it really, this entire West Bank? It's only a couple of small townships."

We may forget that top political leaders live very different lives from the rest of us. Their escorts whisk them through red lights and they often travel about by helicopter. From the cockpit of a helicopter, the West Bank might indeed look like little more than a handful of wretchedly small townships. Dayan's mood was reflected in an interview he gave at the time to the editor of *Der Spiegel*. Asked how Israel hoped to achieve peace his answer was: by standing firm as iron, wherever we are now standing, until the Arabs are ready to give in.

Q: Then it's only King Hussein who is likely to qualify as a partner in negotiations. But he isn't strong enough to agree to [your] conditions.

Dayan: In this case let them find themselves another king.

Q: But Jordan as a country may not be strong enough to agree to peace on Dayan's conditions.

Dayan: In this case let them find themselves another country.

Q: Under these circumstances, it is hard to hope for peace soon.

Dayan: That's probably right.

Before the Yom Kippur War of 1973, Dayan's position toward Egypt was that it was preferable to retain Sharm el Sheik and half the Sinai peninsula without peace than to have peace with Egypt without retaining Sharm el Sheik. After the Yom Kippur War, Dayan's position toward Egypt changed, and he was willing to leave the occupied Sinai. As for the occupied West Bank, in complete disregard of demographic realities, he remained an annexationist. Henry Kissinger complained that whenever he asked the Israelis about their political intentions there, he failed to receive an answer.

The truth was that despite the "Three No's" of Khartoum, direct negotiations with Jordan began soon after the Six-Day War, by 1970 with King Hussein himself. Even while Golda Meir was publicly lamenting, "If the Arabs would only sit down with us at a table like decent human beings and talk!," her representatives were secretly meeting the King. Hussein flew his own helicopter to Tel Aviv and was taken by Dayan on a tour of the city by night. The King was ready to make peace with Israel if Israel withdrew from much of the West Bank as well as from East Jerusalem and if the Muslim and Christian holy places in the Old City were restored to Jordan. The King was ready to make concessions to Israel along the narrow

coastal plain and at the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Israel would not hear of it. The expanded municipal area of Jerusalem—by now it included not only Arab East Jerusalem but a part of the former West Bank—was declared Israel's capital for "all eternity." In addition to this Greater Jerusalem area, which was being intensively settled by Israelis on land confiscated from its Palestinian owners, Israel insisted on the latest (expanded) version of the Allon Plan. It called for the annexation of the entire Jordan Valley from the Lake of Tiberias down to the Dead Sea, the heavily populated area between Jerusalem and Hebron in the south, and the slopes of the western and northern mountain range of Samaria in the north. The King indicated that for such far-reaching concessions the Israelis would have to negotiate with the PLO. In retrospect, it is tragic that no agreement could be reached with Palestinian leaders in the West Bank or with Jordan in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

We are speaking of a time, thirty years ago, before the Palestinians were radicalized by an increasingly humiliating occupation regime and by large-scale expropriation of Palestinian land for the exclusive use of Israeli settlers. Neither Hamas nor Hezbollah existed and the PLO was not recognized internationally. Hamas was, in fact, encouraged by the Israelis as a counterweight to the PLO, much as the CIA supported the Islamic extremists in Afghanistan. An autonomous Palestinian entity, at peace with Israel, would not have removed the PLO from the scene but it might have considerably weakened its impact. Alternatively, in a peace settlement with Jordan the Palestinian issue might have reverted to what it had been before 1967: mainly a Jordanian problem.

The failure to reach an agreement seems all the more tragic, since at that time there were still relatively few settlers—fewer than 3,000—and they would not have been able to veto all concessions, as they do today. Today there are 200,000 settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip—their number has been allowed to almost double since the Oslo agreement of 1993. With 200,000 more settlers on former Jordanian territory in East Jerusalem, the total number has now reached 400,000. The settlement project continues to grow even now. Imagine

the effect on the peace process in Northern Ireland if the British government continued moving thousands of Protestants from Scotland into Ulster and settling them, at government expense, on land confiscated from Irish Catholics.

The occupation was, by and large, a paying proposition. Until the first intifada twenty years later its costs were more than covered by taxes on the Palestinian population as well as by turning the West Bank and Gaza into a captive market for Israeli-produced goods and services. Michael Ben Yair, Israel's attorney general in the Rabin government, recently wrote in *Ha'aretz*:

The Six-Day War was forced on us; but the war's Seventh day, which began on June 12, 1967—continues to this day and is the product of our choice. We enthusiastically chose to become a colonialist society, ignoring international treaties, expropriating lands, transferring settlers from Israel to the occupied territories, engaging in theft and finding justifications for all this.

These are harsh words, but it is a characteristic of the tragic folly I am describing that Ben Yair did not put forward such views in a legal brief when he was still attorney general, as he could have done nine years earlier.

The settlers now are the strongest political lobby in Israel. In recent years they have been supported by lavish subsidies, grants of land, low-rent housing, government jobs, tax benefits, and social services more generous than any in Israel proper. The settlements are now a kind of suburbia of Israel proper: most settlers commute daily to their jobs in Jerusalem and the greater Tel Aviv area. With few exceptions, the settlements have not made Israel more "secure" as was sometimes claimed; they have made Israel less secure. They have greatly extended the country's lines of defense. They impose a crushing burden of protecting widely dispersed settlements deep inside densely populated Palestinian territories, where ever larger numbers of Palestinians are increasingly infuriated by the inevitable

controls, curfews, and violence, as well as by humiliation imposed on them by insensitive or undisciplined recruits and army reservists.

Two examples: an entire armored regiment has been tied down for years to protect a small colony of nationalist, religious fanatics in downtown Hebron, a deeply fundamentalist Muslim city. They believe that the Kingdom of God is near and—at first against government orders—squatted illegally in a couple of abandoned, half-ruined houses.

In the Gaza Strip some of the well-established, prospering settlements are only a few hundred meters away from the vast refugee camps, populated by third- and fourth-generation Palestinian refugees. In five minutes a visitor might feel as if he were passing from Southern California to Bangladesh—through barbed-wire entanglements, past watchtowers, searchlights, machine-gun positions, and fortified roadblocks: a bizarre and chilling sight.

The Palestinians are infuriated as well by seeing their olive groves uprooted or burned down by settlers while their water faucets go dry and their ancestral land reserves and scarce water resources are taken over for the use of settlers who luxuriate nearby in their swimming pools and consume five times as much water as the average Palestinian. The settlements themselves occupy less than 20 percent of the West Bank, but through a network of so-called regional councils they control planning and environmental policy for approximately 40 percent of the West Bank, according to figures recently published by B'tzelem, the Israeli human rights organization.

It is not difficult to imagine what the settlers' lobby means in a country with notoriously narrow parliamentary majorities. Though 70 percent of Israeli voters say in the polls that they support abandoning some of the settlements, 400,000 settlers and their right-wing and Orthodox supporters within Israel proper now control at least half the national vote. They pose a constant threat of civil war if their interests are not fully respected. At their core is a group of fanatical nationalists and religious fundamentalists who believe they know exactly what God and Abraham said to each other in the Bronze Age.

The settlers are no longer outsiders or squatters as they once were. A great many became settlers for purely pragmatic reasons—cheaper housing in what they hoped would be more pleasant surroundings within easy commuting distance to Israel. For almost twenty-five years the settlers have been praised by every Israeli government as patriots, good citizens, good Zionists. At least in the West Bank, the settlement project long ago became a cornerstone of Zionist and Israeli national identity. By now there is a second generation of settlers who see no difference between themselves and other Israelis who live in Tel Aviv or Tiberias. Since the outbreak of the most recent intifada and the emergence of reckless suicide bombers, moreover, they are not merely defending an idea; as they see it, they are defending "home."

As a result, on both sides now, the extremists are dominant: in Israel and Palestine they veto all progress toward peace. Disasters follow one after another daily and the end is not in sight. Hamas seems to have usurped the Palestinian national movement while hard-line religious groups seem to be usurping the Jewish national cause. The situation seems all the more tragic, since thirty years after Hussein's first peace proposals in 1970, a similar peace scheme was tentatively endorsed by the Barak government. At Camp David, one of the worst-prepared peace conferences in history, Clinton, not Barak himself, conveyed to the Palestinians several "bases for negotiation" calling for a Palestinian state in which Israelis would continue to occupy roughly 9 percent of the West Bank; as Robert Malley and Hussein Agha wrote in these pages, Arafat was "unable to say yes to the American ideas or present a cogent or specific counterproposal of [his] own."^[1]

After more secret meetings between Israeli and Palestinian diplomats during the autumn, Clinton, on December 23, 2000, conveyed to Arafat what he called the "parameters" of an improved scheme, which the Israeli cabinet accepted^[2]; Arafat's reply to Clinton was delayed ten days, and when it finally arrived it expressed both interest in the new proposals and reservations about them. The negotiators (but not the principals) met again at Taba in Egypt between January 21 and 27

in 2001 and issued a statement saying, "The two sides have never been closer to reaching an agreement and it is thus our shared belief that the remaining gaps could be bridged...." It was too late: Clinton had left office, and the Israeli elections were impending. Like every other observer, Arafat was aware that Barak would lose.

We can only speculate on his reasons for not clearly accepting at least the basic outlines of an agreement. He may have thought he might obtain better terms under the incoming Bush administration. Or he may have despaired of ever restoring the West Bank and Gaza to Palestinian rule by diplomatic means. According to Robert Malley, who was present at the Camp David negotiations, the Palestinian negotiators were divided and competed with one another. Arafat apparently lost control over some of his own internal factions. He may have hoped at this moment that just as Hezbollah terror had succeeded in driving Israel out of southern Lebanon, so Israel could be forced by continuing violence to abandon Gaza and the West Bank. Arafat's strategy at this stage, or perhaps even before, could even have been to hold out for a kind of Greater Palestine—just as powerful Israelis had long been planning a Greater Israel from the sea to the river Jordan. Sharon has long said he has been in favor of a Palestinian state east of the river, i.e., in what is now Jordan.

I don't pretend to know what makes Arafat tick. He and his henchmen certainly underestimated, grossly so, Israel's power, resilience, resolve, and international support. Arafat may, or may not, have decided already in 1993 to exploit the Oslo agreement in order to first consolidate a power base on the West Bank and then try to enlarge it later on to include a Greater Palestine, taking over all or parts of Israel proper. This is what the hard-liners in Israel claim and they may be right. Or they may be wrong: the Palestinians invested \$3 billion in new tourist facilities on the West Bank during the past seven years; they may not have done so if the plan had always been to wage an all-out struggle. Such an investment would make sense for the Palestinian state that Arafat has often said he wants and Sharon is determined to prevent.

I interviewed Arafat in his Tunis headquarters in 1993 while the secret Oslo talks were still going on. He never hinted even vaguely that he knew of the talks, though one of his aides did. Arafat complained at great length about Rabin. At one point I asked him: "What do you want Rabin to do?" He said: "He is not a De Gaulle. Let him be at least a De Klerk." To Israeli ears, this sounded ominous. Under De Gaulle, the entire French population quit Algeria. Under De Klerk, the whites were allowed to remain in a Greater South Africa controlled by the black majority. Arafat refused to clarify this remark. It may have been mere rhetoric. Out of Arafat's hearing, one of his assistants later said sarcastically: "Well, the old man is no De Gaulle either."

The right wing in Israel may be correct in claiming, as they now do, that no workable compromise is possible with the Palestinians, but if they are right, there is all the more reason to regret the strategically senseless extension of Israel's defense lines to embrace a multitude of vulnerable, widely dispersed, often isolated Israeli settlements deep in heavily populated Palestinian territory. Instead of minimizing friction, they increased it. Almost 200 settlements on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip and more than 200,000 settlers in East Jerusalem are potentially explosive irritants that can undo any possible historic compromise. How much easier would it now have been, if Israel were poised more or less along the 1967 line (from which, after all, it defeated three Arab countries in six days).

Instead Sharon's government is now trying, mostly for domestic political reasons, to build high walls along this line and innumerable other high walls around each settlement and each Palestinian town. Every other day it dispatches tanks and combat helicopters to patrol the roads leading to each settlement. It nevertheless suffers heavy casualties, calls up the reserves, and deploys huge forces in Jerusalem to prevent suicide bombers from making their way into Jewish neighborhoods. In too many cases, these extensive security measures fail—invariably perhaps, since in Jerusalem Palestinian and Israeli residential and business quarters are intermixed, suicide bombers seem to get through the tightest controls, and retaliating strikes don't

discourage them.

In Israel and in Palestine, the center has collapsed. The much talked about "two-state solution" may no longer be practicable since on both sides all confidence is gone. The extremists of Greater Israel and the extremists of Greater Palestine mutually veto all progress. I use the terms "Greater Israel" and "Greater Palestine" with deliberate bitterness. We know the evil wrought by similar "Great" projects elsewhere: "Greater Serbia," "Greater Bulgaria," "Greater Ustashi Croatia," and "Greater Greece."

Israel is now likely to remain in physical control of millions of restive Palestinians. We don't know for how long. It is possible that the long-sought "solution" will be delayed by another generation, perhaps more than one. For what does Ariel Sharon mean when he says he aims at dismantling what he calls the "infrastructure" of terror? The true "infrastructure" is not in some odd garage or workshop where belts loaded with explosives and steel nails are prepared and homemade mortar missiles are built. The true infrastructure is more dangerous: it consists both of the growing willingness of enraged young men and women to blow themselves up and the religious and political culture in twenty-one Arab countries that praises the suicide bombers as martyrs. This "infrastructure" is diffuse. It may not have a center. The most powerful air force can't defeat it. In Afghanistan the Americans defeated the Taliban but not al-Qaeda, which continues to exist.

The race between Netanyahu and Sharon for the leadership of Likud is pushing both men further to the right. Sharon says he will not dismantle a single settlement. For both men, this may or may not be a bargaining position. But for their political survival, both men depend on right-wing and religious extremists. By effectively consuming the one thing Israel had to offer the Palestinians in return for peace—Palestinian land—the extended settlement project, I fear, may yet prove Israel's undoing. It may lead to two equally awful alternatives: wholesale ethnic cleansing or permanent violence, terror, suicide bombers, possibly all-out war.

3.

Perhaps Israel's greatest tragedy has been the deterioration over the years of the quality of Israeli leadership. A flawed electoral system had a lot to do with this, since it discourages clear majorities. Recent attempts to tinker with the constitution have increased political instability. In less than a decade, one prime minister was assassinated by a right-wing fanatic and three prime ministers have been unable to serve out their terms. Government continues to depend on forming unwieldy coalitions that give undue leverage to religious and other splinter and pressure groups. The perennial instability has encouraged waste, xenophobia, and demagoguery. The moral bankruptcy of the Labor Party made inevitable the ascendancy of Likud and its religious, nationalist, and semifascist allies.

It remains to be seen if in the few weeks left until the Israeli election, Amram Mitzna, the new Labor leader, will succeed in reversing this trend. It seems unlikely. By promising to renew peace talks unconditionally with the Palestinians and to withdraw from Gaza and from some of the more remote West Bank settlements, Mitzna has at least offered voters a clearer alternative to Sharon than has been the case so far. He faces the enormous task of reeducating a terrorized electorate driven by recent events to support harsh measures against Palestinians. He must also try to rebuild a discredited party shattered by shameless opportunism and infighting among special interest groups.

It could be argued that the missed peace opportunities would have saved a lot of needless bloodshed and it could, of course, also be argued that such a "peace" might have proved to be illusory, a short-lived cease-fire with an adversary resolved to remove an intrusion, as the Crusader state was wiped out after a series of cease-fires and armistices. The jihad, according to this line of thought, would go on and on. I am not saying that it won't; but the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, which have survived many a tough moment, seem to suggest that the wider Arab-Israeli conflict can only end if Israelis and Palestinians arrive at a compromise.

The nature and details of such a compromise have been known for years: the partition of a country over which the two national independence movements have clashed for almost a century now. The bazaar diplomacy of the past ten years has clearly been counterproductive. The so-called "incremental" Oslo peace process was abused by both sides; by relegating the most difficult problems to the very last stage it encouraged both sides to cheat. When force did not work, there was a tendency to believe in using more force, which led, as we are seeing, only to another dead end. The search for secure borders—even when it did not involve the domination of one people by another—was carried too far. No border is ever deemed absolutely secure before it seems absolutely insecure to the other side and so makes the next war inevitable.

The vast settlement project after 1967, aside from being grossly unjust, has been self-defeating and politically ruinous. "We've fed the heart on fantasies,/the heart's grown brutal on the fare," as William B. Yeats put it almost a century ago in a similar dead-end situation in Ireland. The settlement project has not provided more security but less. It may yet, I tremble at the thought, lead to results far more terrible than those we are now witnessing.

November 21, 2002

Notes

[1] See "Camp David: The Tragedy of Errors," *The New York Review*, August 9, 2001.

[2] See Malley and Agha's reply to Ehud Barak in "Camp David and After: An Exchange," *The New York Review*, June 13, 2002.

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