# Fall from the Summit

by David Makovsky **(/experts/david-makovsky)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Articles & Testimony

David Makovsky reviewed Schlomo Ben-Ami's new book, Scars of War, Wounds of Peace: The Israeli-Arab Tragedy (Oxford University Press, 2006), for the June 4, 2006, Washington Post Book World. The following is the text of his review.

Shlomo Ben-Ami was there when it all went sour -- serving as Israel's foreign minister at the go-for-broke Camp David peace summit in the summer of 2000. Perhaps chastened by that historic failure, he seems to have given up on making history and seeks in his new book to write it instead. The result is a provocative interpretive essay focused on decades of largely inadequate Arab-Israeli peacemaking.

Ben-Ami shot like a meteor through Israeli politics during the 1990s. Labor Party pols saw this Oxford-trained historian as a potential savior -- a man who could woo back disaffected Sephardic Jews (descended from Middle Eastern countries) to the party that their parents had abandoned a generation earlier. (Labor, remember, is the country's Mayflower party, filled with Israel's WASPs -- White Ashkenazim Sympathetic to Palestinians.) But Ben-Ami's passion was not the political grunt work of luring back his fellow Sephardim but the larger quest for Middle East peace. He was recruited by the Labor stalwart Shimon Peres to become Israel's ambassador to Spain, then clambered up the political ladder. His public career ultimately crashed, though; he protested Labor's decision to join Ariel Sharon's right-leaning, Likud-led government in 2001 and -- ironically enough for such an impeccable liberal -- was excoriated by an Israeli commission during his stint as police minister for mishandling a 2000 riot in which 13 Israeli Arabs were killed by Israeli cops.

So Ben-Ami now belongs to a select club of former Israeli foreign ministers, including Moshe Sharett and Abba Eban, who were formidable intellects lauded outside of government but frustrated inside of it -- irked above all by the generals and prime ministers with whom they served, many of whom insisted that ongoing Arab enmity toward the Jewish state meant that any Israeli diplomacy not backed by force was doomed to fail. (Ben-Ami also joins the club of former Israeli leaders who've used books to snipe at their rivals -- in this case, his patron-turned-rival, Peres, who, Ben-Ami sniffs, "was never really the political 'dove' that he pretended to be.")

The resultant book is something of a jeremiad: The person who headed Israel's negotiations has given up on them, and he now argues that the international community must impose a solution since Arabs and Israelis are incapable of reaching one. But Ben-Ami never explains how the world could enforce an endgame against the will of such

spectacularly recalcitrant parties.

Still, one can marvel at Ben-Ami's many brilliant analytical insights -- including his subtle, astute observations about Israeli society and his laudable ability to understand the Palestinians' needs, not just Israel's -- while disagreeing with his main policy prescription and some of his major arguments. (Be warned: Ben-Ami sometimes can be too detailed for casual readers.) One key thesis of this book is that, during Israel's early years, the country's founding father, David Ben-Gurion, was more interested in consolidating the Jewish state -- including absorbing Holocaust survivors and Sephardic immigrants -- than in peacemaking. But Ben-Ami himself admits that the Arab states were either uninterested in peace (such as Egypt) or too feeble to really reach out (such as Jordan), leaving Arab politics locked into a "self-defeating rejectionist pattern of behavior."

Ben-Ami is on far stronger ground when he skewers former Israeli prime minister Golda Meir for missing an important opportunity in 1971, when Egypt's new leader, Anwar al-Sadat, offered an interim plan to have the Israeli military withdraw from the shores of the Suez Canal -- a step that might have staved off a bloody Arab-Israeli war two years later. He is also unsparing of Yasser Arafat, blasting the late Palestinian leader as someone who never wanted peace. As Ben-Ami writes, Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak offered Arafat control of the Gaza Strip, a capital in East Jerusalem and more than 90 percent of the West Bank before the second intifada erupted in 2000, but Arafat could accept neither agonizing compromises over core issues nor the moral legitimacy of a Jewish state.

The subsequent bloodshed has shattered Israeli and Palestinian confidence in peacemaking. Like Ben-Ami, Israelis have given up on a short-term, negotiated peace deal and would happily settle for a sturdy border. Surprisingly, Ben-Ami does not dwell here on this trend toward separation. The concept was popular in Israel even before the radical Islamist group Hamas's stunning victory in the Palestinians' January parliamentary elections -- an intellectual shift that let Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's Kadima Party sweep aside both Likud and Labor in Israel's March elections. Israel spent the decades since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war expanding Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, but Olmert now seems to have chosen the opposite strategy: withdrawing settlers from most of the West Bank, even if the Israeli army is likely to remain on guard against Hamas. This should give Ben-Ami, who despairs of peacemaking but favors withdrawing the settlers, a little more room for optimism. Olmert's moves won't end the conflict, but they could minimize it -- which is the best that can be hoped for so long as Hamas is in power.

David Makovsky, a former executive editor of the Jerusalem Post, is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the author of Making Peace With the PLO. ❖

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