

Lessons of Oslo's Failure Must Be Learned for Peace to Bloom

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Nobody spent more time with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat during the years of the Oslo peace process than I did.

Why didn't I see that he was incapable of ending the conflict with Israel? Certainly there were those who claimed he could not be trusted and would never make peace. Why did I think differently?

Throughout the Oslo process I repeatedly asked myself if Arafat was a real partner. There always were reasons to question his credibility.

Initially, he would try to deny Palestinian responsibility for terrorist attacks in Israel, even when groups like Hamas were claiming credit for those acts.

To accept responsibility meant Arafat would have had to take action against Hamas or Islamic Jihad -- and he sought, he said, to divide them rather than confront them.

That was neither acceptable to the Clinton administration nor to Israel's then-prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin. So Arafat began to make arrests in wide sweeps throughout 1994, but those arrested typically were released after outrage over the attack subsided.

Beginning in 1995, after a double suicide bombing that killed 20 Israeli soldiers hitch-hiking at a bus stop at Beit Lid, Rabin asked me to tell Arafat that if he did not act against the groups responsible for the attack, Israel would.

For a time, Arafat became more serious, and Rabin was impressed with the steps he took. That partly explains why Arafat was taken seriously as a partner: From time to time, he did act against Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

But that's only part of the explanation. Just as important, Arafat was the leader of the Palestinians and the very symbol of the Palestinian cause, a symbolism he sought to preserve at all costs.

Moreover, it was Arafat who had signed the Oslo deal and recognized Israel, receiving assassination threats from a number of rejectionist Palestinian groups.

Indeed, both we and the Israelis warned of assassination plots against him, and even provided training for Arafat's

personal security guards.

Beyond his periodic crackdowns on terror, Arafat did conclude five limited interim peace deals with Israel. He always followed the same negotiating pattern: He would hold out until the last possible moment, and then, when it was clear that further delays might cost him any gains, he would conclude the deal.

Whether it was the first Gaza-Jericho agreement or the deal at the end of eight days of summitry at Wye River Plantation, Arafat's style was always the same: satisfy himself that he could not do better, then conclude the agreement.

While his style was maddening, every time I would tell those closest to him -- Mahmoud Abbas, Ahmed Qurei, Mohammed Dahlan or Saeb Erekat -- that I had had enough and saw no point in continuing to deal with Arafat, they would tell me that only Arafat had the moral authority among the Palestinians to make concessions on the existential issues of Jerusalem, borders and refugees.

They realized that they couldn't make the necessary compromises on these issues -- but they believed that at the moment of truth, Arafat would do so.

Those closest to Arafat, who had lived for years with his lies, equivocations and outright betrayals, still believed that he had crossed the Rubicon with the Oslo process and would -- when he had satisfied himself that he had gotten all he could -- make the tough decisions and end the conflict with Israel.

But his closest colleagues were wrong. Like us and many Israelis, they were wrong in believing that Yasser Arafat could end the conflict.

None of us ultimately understood that the "cause" defined Arafat; he could not live without it and the struggle that it embodied.

Arafat could conclude limited agreements because they did not require him to surrender the cause or his claims or his grievances. He could accept limited understandings because they didn't require him to make irrevocable commitments -- and Yasser Arafat has never made an irrevocable commitment to anyone, and never will.

He will never close the door on any option or foreclose the possibility of preserving a one-state solution -- that is to say, not independent and adjacent Israeli and Palestinian states, but a single state over all of historic Palestine.

With Arafat, a modus vivendi is possible, but peace is not.

As I reflect on the past, I doubt that we could have created a moment of truth to discover this earlier. When we presented the Clinton ideas in December 2000, it was unmistakably the moment of truth.

Consider that the Clinton ideas were the best we could conceivably offer, and that we were out of time, with Clinton due to leave office just four weeks later.

Consider too that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak was likely to lose the upcoming Israeli election if there were no agreement, and everything that was on the table for the Palestinians -- 100 percent of the Gaza Strip and roughly 97 percent of the West Bank, the Arab neighborhoods of eastern Jerusalem, independent borders with Egypt and Jordan, an international security presence, a "right of return" for refugees to their state but not to Israel, and \$30 billion in compensation and assistance for refugees choosing not to return to the State of Palestine -- would all be lost.

Arafat knew this -- yet still he said no. He failed the test.

But if we could not have created a moment of truth earlier, is it fair to say there was no other way to test Arafat? Clearly there were other ways to do so, and as I think about the lessons that need to be drawn, several come to mind.

First, it should have been made clear to Arafat that we would not deal with him if he failed to delegitimize terrorism. In fact, he never did so.

He formally renounced terrorism as a condition for gaining Israeli recognition, but that renunciation meant little when he continued -- and still continues -- to glorify as martyrs those who carried out acts of violence against Israelis.

Second, we should have created conditions for our involvement in permanent-status negotiations. We should have insisted that Arafat had to prepare his public for compromise by declaring that neither the Palestinians nor Israelis would get 100 percent of what they wanted on Jerusalem, borders and refugees.

In that way, he would have made clear that compromise was legitimate and necessary. His unwillingness to do this -- which we would have discovered earlier had we pressed the issue -- would have told us that he could not settle the conflict.

Knowing this, we could have altered our strategy and aimed not to settle the conflict but to contain it and prevent a war until Arafat passed from the scene.

In truth, this was a condition that we should have imposed on both sides. Preparing publics for compromise was a necessary part of peacemaking, and we simply did not insist on it enough.

Similarly, we did not do what was necessary with each side to create people-to-people ties. There was an annex in the 1995 interim agreement on building such relations, but it was given short shrift -- and when Arafat resisted doing much on it, neither we nor the Israelis made an issue of it.

That was a mistake: People-to-people ties would have made it easier for each side to compromise and would have made it much more difficult to demonize the other.

Ultimately, responsibility must be the hallmark of any process of peacemaking. Palestinians and Israelis must be accountable for the commitments they make. One failing of the Oslo process was that neither side was held to its obligations.

Since 2001, there has been no peace process, only a war between Israelis and Palestinians. Given that legacy and the lack of belief in peacemaking, the first order of business must be stopping the war.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's decision to withdraw from the Gaza Strip has created an opening to unfreeze the situation. It certainly is creating great ferment among Palestinians as they wrestle with how they will govern themselves, at least within the Gaza Strip.

We will need to be much more active in shaping diplomacy -- ours, the Egyptians' and the Europeans' -- so that the Palestinians see the cost of not assuming real responsibilities, including security responsibilities, in the areas from which Israel withdraws.

Should we succeed in getting the Palestinians to establish a rule of law and good governance, something Palestinians themselves are now demanding, we may be able to construct a way station to peace.

That way station would provide the essential prerequisites for getting back to peacemaking: freedom for Israelis from the threat of daily terrorism, and freedom for the Palestinians from Israeli control.

Dennis Ross, Ziegler Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, was President Clinton's envoy to the Middle East. His new book, *The Missing Peace*, will be published in August by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. ❖

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