

From Oslo to Camp David to Taba: Setting the Record Straight

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Brief Analysis

On August 8, 2001, Dennis Ross, counselor and distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and former special Middle East coordinator in the Clinton administration, addressed queries posed by Margaret Warner and Jim Hoagland during a special question-and-answer session. The following are excerpts from the discussion. [Read a full transcript. \(templateC07.php?CID=172\)](#)

On Barak's Eschewing Incrementalism

Warner: [What do you think of the] thesis that Barak had always had an antipathy to the sort of step-by-step process in Oslo, [that] he wanted to leap over it all and just go for a comprehensive deal?

Ross: Barak's major preoccupation was that he not be put in a position where in advance of an end-game summit, he would squander the political capital he would need to take historic steps that no other Israeli government would contemplate, that were the most profound since the founding of the state, and that were as challenging as any decisions that Ben Gurion made. His mindset was riveted on an end-game summit where he could finally talk about issues like Jerusalem...and not be exposed because the result would be an agreement. The mindsets of both sides were obviously very different, but I think the most critical difference in the mindsets at that point is that Barak was thinking about a historic deal...

In one way or the other, I was involved in negotiating five deals with Arafat...In every single one of these five limited deals with Arafat, one thing became positively clear: he would never reveal anything he did not have to reveal, and he would never move except one second to midnight...You had to try to get to a point where he was most likely to think it was time for decisions. I was concerned that in July, it was premature, from his standpoint, because I thought September 13th was probably his decision point. But here is a kind of interesting historical reality. President Clinton...was very concerned that if we put off a summit until the latter part of August or the beginning of September, it would look as if he was trying to supplant the U.S. [presidential] campaign...So even though my preference would have been to go later, when the choice was either you have a summit now or you have no summit, I opted for the summit...

We knew, from the eight days of violence which involved the Tanzim and the Palestinian security forces exchanging gunfire with the IDF [Israeli Defense Forces], that we were headed towards an explosion. If we had the explosion, we thought we would probably lose the possibility [for a deal], without ever having tested it.

On Who was More Forthcoming at Camp David

Hoagland: Do you believe today that Arafat engaged in good-faith negotiations?

Ross:...One of the problems is that he kept a certain distance from [the negotiations]...He himself, when he was at Camp David, never seriously engaged. It is right he did not have the opportunity to do it with Barak, but he had the opportunity to do it frequently with the President, and he did not... In fourteen days [at Camp David], Arafat did not just say no. He also created or invented new mythologies that were completely unhelpful...One of his new mythologies that he created at Camp David was, "There was no temple in Jerusalem. It was only an obelisk." When you question the core of the other side's faith, that is not exactly an indication that you are getting ready to try to end the conflict...The big difference between the two sides was, Barak, in the end, was prepared to confront history and mythology, and make decisions; and Arafat gave no indication that he was prepared to confront history and mythology and make decisions.

On Clinton Criticizing Arafat

Hoagland: Did Clinton promise not to criticize Arafat if the summit failed? Did he go back on his word?

Ross: He did say, "You can come, we're not going to play the blame game."... There was an element assuming good faith, and I think some of what drove him at the end was he was genuinely angry that he had heard nothing from Arafat in fifteen days... The last night, there was a two-and-a-half hour session at the very end that involved the President, myself, Shlomo Ben-Ami and Saeb Erakat, where we tried out a series of different ideas. What came through pretty clearly from the Palestinian side was it didn't matter what we tried out, they were not going to give an answer, not this time around. So I think that added to his own sense of frustration, number one.

Number two, if you recall, he did not criticize Arafat. When he came out in the press conference afterwards, he lauded Barak and he basically said "Arafat showed up". So he did not criticize him, but by the distinction between praising Barak and saying Arafat showed up, he clearly drew a distinction between the two.

On the Timing of the Clinton Proposals

Warner: Your basic argument with Arafat was that he just kept saying no, but he never presented a counter-proposal.

Ross:... We were not asking them to initiate a proposal. We were asking them to respond to the proposal that they got... When we presented the ideas that we presented, the President asked, "Do these ideas provide a basis for conclusion?" Those are the exact words, meaning there will be negotiation on these ideas, but you cannot go to the negotiation table now and treat these as they are simply a point of departure that you can ignore... So what we needed to know is that they were going to be taken as a basis for conclusion, not simply a basis for negotiations... The Palestinians came back and said no, they do not represent a basis for conclusion. So they were not, in effect, asked at Camp David to come with a counter-response, other than the kind I described.

As soon as Chairman Arafat went back to Gaza [after Camp David], even though he was defiant publicly, privately, and even actually publicly, he called for another summit... They agreed, at that time, to a private channel, and they initiated it; they held 38 meetings, and they focused on Jerusalem and they focused on security. They really focused neighborhood by neighborhood, how you would organize things, and it was very serious... [There was] a Palestinian initiative to come [to Washington]. We had meetings for three days over at the Ritz-Carlton in Pentagon City on September 26th, 27th, and 28th. At the end of those three days, I summarized for each side where I understood each

side's position. Without telling them for sure what our positions would be, I gave them a direction on each issue of what our thinking was, without being overly specific... I said to them, "The President will decide whether he presents the [U.S.] ideas and when he presents them, but obviously, we wouldn't be going through this process unless the President was serious about doing so."

This was September 28th. This was the day that Sharon went to the Temple Mount to look around, and we got word from the Israelis later that evening that violent demonstrations were planned for the next day, and they asked us to intervene with Arafat. Secretary Albright did call Arafat, and asked him to intervene to put a stop, precisely because of where we were and what we were about to do, and that was not done. Nothing was done to prevent or contain the violence at that point. I say this because the ideas that we presented on December 23rd were ideas maybe a little bit more advanced, but probably not a lot more advanced, than what we would have presented on October 1st...

[Some] say, "Gee, if we had only presented [the President's ideas] earlier, you would have had the deal..." With the eruption of the violence, there was no chance that Barak would agree to anything like this. He agreed to it later on because ... towards the end of November, the violence dropped dramatically because there was active work going on between the two sides in a private channel that we had helped to create... If we had been able to present these ideas in October, would it have made a difference, especially if the violence had been contained? My own feeling is it could well have made a difference...

Later on, with the Clinton ideas in December, they were asked to give a response, and they did not...The Chairman said to the President, in my presence, on January 2, 2001, "I accept your ideas." And then he proceeded to tick off three reservations, each of which completely vitiated the ideas. So the answer was, he never formally said no, but his yes was a no...

On Whether Arafat Can Compromise

Warner: The conventional wisdom about all of this has been that Yasir Arafat is incapable or unwilling of making an historic compromise. Do you believe that?

Ross: I do, personally, feel that it is too hard for him to redefine himself. It is too hard for him to give up what had been the mythologies that had guided him. It is too hard, as a revolutionary-and that is what he is-to give up struggle, to give up claims, to give up grievance, because they have been the animating factors of his life. In my judgment, he is someone who was capable of launching this process, and maybe nobody else could have from the Palestinian side, but I do not believe he's capable of concluding the process.

On the Significance of Taba

Warner: One, what is your understanding of what really happened [at the Taba negotiations in January 2001]; and two, what does it say about the ability to negotiate even while violence is going on?

Ross: [Taba] says a lot more about an environment where an election was pending, and those in Israel who were negotiating there felt it was essential, even if you could not win the election, to create a set of baselines that would constrain the next government. I do not view it as a lesson in terms of negotiating under violence. I view it as a concern about where the future was going to be if you did not establish these baselines, given what those negotiating at Taba on the Israeli side believed the election was going to produce, namely, Prime Minister Sharon. I think Taba was much more, from the Palestinian side, about trying to hook the new administration and create a sense of continuity with the Clinton ideas, and affecting the Israeli election, than it was about actually coming to conclusions.

Future Negotiations

Question from the floor: Is it your judgment that any future negotiations, if we ever get back to that point, will essentially have to start from the Camp David/Taba formulas?

Ross:... Camp David broke the taboos. The Clinton ideas reflected the best judgment of what was possible between the two sides in terms of their essential needs. But the Clinton ideas were, as I put it, the roof, not the ceiling, the roof. They were not the floor, they were not the ceiling, they were the roof. They were the best that could be done.

Secret Channels

Question from the floor: Is it not true that, with regards to the preparations for the summit, particularly the secret negotiations between Shlomo Ben-Ami and Abu Ala, that the Israelis effectively froze that channel?

Ross:...The problem was the channel had been exposed in leaks... After it was leaked, Abu Ala negotiated in a completely different way. The first time around, he tried out ideas in my presence. After the channel was leaked, he adopted a position that he could not even address security questions unless the Israelis conceded the border first, the eastern border first. I know this, because again, I was part of this. Every single idea the Israelis tried, and frankly, every idea I was trying, was not producing any response. The Israelis did not kill the channel because suddenly they were not prepared to discuss anymore. The channel stopped because basically it was not producing anything anymore. One of the tragedies, perhaps, one of the missed opportunities, was the leaking of that channel.

I come back to something basic. I can recite the litany of mistakes I think that Barak made, but they were all tactical, and in the end, he was up to the strategic challenge. He was up to doing what was required, as I said, to take on history and to take on mythology. Bear in mind that in the Clinton idea, both sides were asked to give up fundamental animating beliefs... In the end, Barak was prepared to do what was required of him. Arafat, at least from our judgment, was not.

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